

# How Housing Professionals Perceive Effects of the Housing Choice Voucher Program on Suburban Communities

David P. Varady  
Xinhao Wang  
Dugan Murphy  
Andrew Stahlke  
University of Cincinnati

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## Abstract

*In recent years, increasing numbers of households using housing vouchers have moved to the suburbs, following a general trend for minority and low-income families. Suburban residents often resist this in-movement because of concerns that the clustering of voucher families will lead to increases in crime and decreases in property values. Through a case study of Hamilton County, Ohio, employing both spatial analysis (overall trends for the county and distributional trends within two inner suburbs) and unstructured informant interviews with civic leaders, landlords, public officials, and fair housing advocates, this article seeks to improve the existing understanding of the level of support or resistance to the Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP) by these stakeholders. Although informants endorsed HCVP as a mechanism for accessing affordable housing, they expressed concern about some forms of negative neighborhood spillovers (for example, poorly maintained property exteriors, cultural conflicts, and declining school test scores). In line with recent academic writings, informants recognized that voucher in-migration often is more a symptom rather than a cause of decline. This article addresses possible ways to increase the effectiveness of HCVP in the suburbs.*

## Introduction

Since 1980, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has shifted its focus from subsidizing building owners to subsidizing tenants; that is, the Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP). One of the program's primary stated purposes is to provide low-income renters with access to better quality housing, safer neighborhoods, and better neighborhood amenities. Academic discourse on the subject has focused in part on how well HCVP succeeds at deconcentrating poverty and desegregating racial minorities and on the real and perceived effects of voucher holders in local communities, especially suburbs (Briggs and Dreier, 2008). Many American politicians, policymakers, and citizen activists, however, fear that the movement of low-income households into their community—sometimes in conjunction with the restructuring of public housing; that is, the HOPE VI program—will result in the recluster of households in already fragile neighborhoods where they will continue to struggle with poverty and deprivation and cause nuisances and conflict in their new living environment (for a detailed assessment of this literature, see Kleinhaus and Varady, 2011).

The purpose of this article is to better understand the movement of HCVP households into innerring suburban neighborhoods from the point of view of community leaders, developers, public officials, and housing activists. We leave to others the task of statistically measuring the effects of the in-migration of HCVP households on suburban neighborhoods. Our focus is on two communities (Finneytown and Forest Park) in Hamilton County, Ohio. Both are experiencing racial and economic change and growing numbers of HCVP households. Using the results of informant interviews, we seek answers to the following four questions. First, why do these key stakeholders believe HCVP households are clustering in particular areas? Second, what are the perceived effects (that is, the negative neighborhood spillovers) of HCVP in suburban communities? Third, to what degree do key informants believe that HCVP is responsible for community decline or improvement? Fourth, what are the key perceived problems, if any, in the way HCVP is administered by the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA), especially in suburban communities, and, if problems exist, what new approaches might be used to address problems at suburban HCVP hotspots?

## Literature Review

HCVP—formerly Section 8—has been acclaimed by its advocates for providing low-income families the chance to improve their housing conditions and locate in safer neighborhoods with better schools (Briggs and Dreier, 2008).<sup>1</sup> Other observers have voiced concerns about negative spillover effects, however, which occur or are perceived to occur as a result of the in-migration of HCVP households (Churchill et al., 2001; Galster, Tatian, and Smith, 1999; Kleinhaus and Varady, 2011;

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<sup>1</sup> A growing body of literature (see, for example, Briggs, Popkin, and Goering, 2010; Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum, 2000) has documented the success of the Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program and the Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing Demonstration Program in moving low-income families to better and safer neighborhoods and, to a limited extent, in fostering socioeconomic mobility. Because these programs are relatively small-scale experimental or demonstration programs that constrain locational choices to neighborhoods with low poverty rates or low minority populations (the national HCVP lacks such constraints), however, the two demonstrations' results are not necessarily generalizable to HCVP.

Rosin, 2008; Zielenbach, 2007).<sup>2</sup> Much of the discourse on the program has focused on whether HCVP households tend to cluster geographically and to what extent they affect the neighborhoods they inhabit.

Although some studies show evidence of the potential of HCVP to racially and economically desegregate low-income households within metropolitan areas, the consensus among housing academics and professionals seems to be that, at least in some areas, HCVP households tend to cluster together. Varady, Wang, and Duhaney's (2010) hotspot analysis (see also Wang and Varady, 2005) showed growth in the number and density of HCVP clusters within Hamilton County between 2000 and 2005. This result was echoed in Ellen, Lens, and Reagan's (2011) study of multiple U.S. cities; Galster, Tatian, and Smith's (1999) study of Baltimore; and Zielenbach's (2007) study of Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C.

Although evidence presented in the literature leaves unclear exactly what spillover effects HCVP households may generate for their neighbors, the predominant perception is that they bring higher crime rates, decreased neighborhood satisfaction, more conflicts among neighborhood residents, and lower school test scores, among other effects (Kleinhans and Varady, 2011). Churchill (2001) underscored the importance for program administrators of taking these claims seriously, whether or not the evidence supports them. Zielenbach (2007) echoed this call by recommending that HCVP landlords be held to stricter property maintenance standards and that tenants be held to stringent behavioral standards. Others (Galster, Tatian, and Smith, 1999; Kleinhans and Varady, 2011) recommended that administrators monitor HCVP locations and guide tenants away from vulnerable neighborhoods.

Negative perceptions of HCVP are likely to deter many landlords from participating. Some may believe that concentrations of HCVP households create negative neighborhood spillover effects on destination neighborhoods (Marr, 2005). Marr suggested that the stigma associated with HCVP affects voucher holders and landlords alike, and must be addressed by housing authority officials to involve more landlords from low-poverty areas.

HCVP researchers have argued about the extent to which HCVP clustering causes increased crime and decreased property values. Most researchers acknowledge correlation; Hannah Rosin (2008), in her article in *The Atlantic*, used the existence of a spatial correlation between crime and HCVP clustering to critique the HOPE VI public housing restructuring (which provides housing vouchers to displacees). In their response to Rosin (2008), Briggs and Dreier (2008) asserted that spatial correlation between HCVP clustering and increased crime does not prove that tenants are the source of the crime. Research by Ellen et al. (2011) suggests reverse causation—that areas experiencing increasing levels of crime tend to attract HCVP households. Zielenbach (2007) and Churchill et al. (2001) acknowledged the likelihood of causation of negative spillover effects, but they stressed that perception often overstates or misinterprets the real issues. Galster, Tatian, and Smith (1999) focused on the property values of housing units proximate to HCVP clusters; in neighborhoods that were already economically fragile, clustering was linked to property value declines.

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<sup>2</sup> Of all the studies mentioned here, Churchill et al. (2001) is the only one that focused on the opinions of landlords, public officials, and civic leaders concerning the effects of clusters on surrounding areas.

Recent research (see, for example, Lucy and Phillips, 2006) shows that older suburban areas that experience decline do so for a variety of reasons, including racial shifts and an aging post-World War II housing stock. Therefore, HCVP may play a limited role in causing neighborhood change. The question, then, is how housing officials assess the role of demographic and housing change in relation to the operation of HCVP in accounting for community change, when change actually occurs.

With the exception of Churchill et al. (2001), research (particularly in relation to inner suburbs) on how key community stakeholders react to the immigration of HCVP households has been absent.<sup>3</sup> Are their reactions—as some would argue—simply a reflection of racism, or is resistance in part a realistic reaction to urban problems spilling over into their community or broader shifts occurring in American metropolitan areas? How should local public housing authorities respond to clustering when it occurs, and how should local agencies respond to problems (possibly) caused by clustering?

The remainder of this article is divided into two parts: (1) a description of changes in the distribution of HCVP households in Hamilton County and within the two case study areas, and (2) key informants' assessments of HCVP trends and their effects.

## **Spatial Analysis of HCVP Distribution**

This section begins with an overview of Hamilton County's demographic and housing characteristics. We then focus in on two of the HCVP hotspot communities in the county.

### **Hamilton County As a Whole**

Hamilton County (population 800,362 in 2011) includes Cincinnati (population 296,943 in 2011) and the surrounding suburban communities. The Cincinnati metropolitan area encompasses, besides Hamilton County, three other counties in southwest Ohio, three in northern Kentucky, and one in southeastern Indiana. Hamilton County is broadly typical of older urban counties in the upper Midwest and the Northeast of the United States. The CMHA carries out HCVP in Cincinnati and the rest of Hamilton County.

Spatial analysis of voucher holder distribution throughout Hamilton County in 2000, 2005, and 2011 involved two primary methods: dot distribution and voucher density. (The detailed results of the spatial analysis are included in a previous article, Varady et al. (2012), that is available from Varady. The most striking change among the three dot maps is the increase in the number of vouchers between the 2000 and 2005 samples, from 5,032 to 10,214. The number in 2011

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<sup>3</sup> The suburbanization of Section 8 vouchers has been widely reported in the media. Take, for example, Antelope Valley at the far edge of the Los Angeles sprawl. Between 2001 and 2011, the number of HCVP recipients more than doubled to 3,500, the city changed from mostly White to two-thirds African American, and residents worried about increased crime (Medina, 2011). On July 1, 2013, the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division announced that Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department deputies in Antelope Valley had engaged in "a pattern or practice of discriminatory and otherwise unlawful searches and seizures [related to Section 8 vouchers], including the use of unreasonable force" (Hill, 2013). Mayor R. Rex Parris vowed to work with civil rights leaders and alter attitudes (including his own) about Section 8 residents in the city. Whether the changes in attitudes of governmental officials resulting from the lawsuit will reverse or slow Antelope Valley's decline is unknown.

increased comparatively marginally, to 10,545. The overall voucher distribution appears not to have changed substantially among the three periods. The densification in some areas from 2000 to 2005 reflects the countywide increase in vouchers. During this same period, the proportion of HCVP households living outside Cincinnati increased from 26 percent in 2000, to 29 percent in 2005, and to 34 percent in 2011. Some evidence of an increase in the degree of dispersion of voucher recipients also exists. The proportion of tracts with at least one voucher household increased from 75 percent in 2000 to 89 percent in 2011. The number of census tracts that needed to be accumulated to encompass at least one-half of all voucher holders similarly rose from 26 (11 percent of the total) in 2000 to 72 (32 percent of the total) in 2011.<sup>4</sup>

Because multiple HCVP households living in the same or neighboring buildings may overlap and cluster in ways difficult or impossible for the eye to perceive when viewing a dot distribution map, we continued analyzing voucher dispersal throughout Hamilton County by calculating voucher densities. Using the ESRI ArcGIS Spatial Analyst kernel density tool, we created raster layers that displayed the density of voucher locations using a cell size of 500 feet, a search radius of 2,640 feet (0.5 mile), and an area unit of square miles. We chose these parameters to replicate those used in a previous study of voucher locations in 2000 and 2005 (Varady, Wang, and Duhaney, 2010). The raster layers were symbolized in classified values in terms of vouchers per square kilometer.

In addition to displaying voucher density, we identified hotspots for all three periods. Borrowing criteria from Varady, Wang, and Duhaney (2010), we defined hotspots as areas in which the density of vouchers was equal to or greater than 110 vouchers per square mile. The hotspot analysis (results not included here) suggests a complicated pattern of change for voucher densities and hotspot locations from 2000 to 2011. The number of hotspots rose, although most of that increase was because of the twofold increase in the total number of vouchers from 2000 to 2005. The total area of hotspots dropped moderately from 2005 to 2011, however, at the same time that the number of hotspots and their maximum density were increasing. The number of hotspots both inside and outside the city increased by one, but the area occupied by city hotspots decreased considerably, whereas the area occupied by hotspots outside the city increased moderately.

Although the number of vouchers in Hamilton County doubled from 2000 to 2005, new voucher holders appeared to have located largely within the same sections of the county. The most notable increases in density, however, included an area where Forest Park, Springfield Township, and Colerain Township intersect (what we call the “Forest Park area”), neighborhoods on Cincinnati’s west side, and the central neighborhoods between Over-the-Rhine, Avondale, and Walnut Hills. By 2011, those hotspots on Cincinnati’s west side and central neighborhoods appear to have decreased in size and density. Cincinnati’s northwestern suburban communities, however, including the Finneytown and Forest Park areas, experienced increases in voucher density. We now take a look at voucher clustering and the way it is perceived in these two suburban areas.

## **Two Suburban Hamilton County Hotspots**

Although suburban Hamilton County contains a number of hotspot communities, we have chosen to focus on two of them—Finneytown and Forest Park—because of their unique housing characteristics.

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<sup>4</sup> We obtained basically the same results for dispersion when we used census block groups rather than census tracts.

## Finneytown

Finneytown, located within Springfield Township, is most clearly defined by the Finneytown Local School District. The U.S. Census Bureau recognizes the Finneytown Census Designated Place (CDP), the boundaries of which are similar to those of the school district. The CDP is about 4 square miles and has a population of 13,687.

Finneytown shares a border with Cincinnati but is about 12 miles from Cincinnati's Central Business District. Finneytown's built character reflects its period of primary growth, between 1947 and the end of the 1970s. As an older postwar suburb, road and building configurations are automobile-oriented, but the development pattern is more compact than in newer, more far-flung Cincinnati suburbs. The dominant land use is single-family residential with areas of retail along primary thoroughfares.

The character of Finneytown changed dramatically after World War II from a small, independent town into a suburban community associated with major employers, including Proctor & Gamble and General Electric. Finneytown's character began to change again at the turn of the 21st century, as median income began to decrease and the proportion of African-American residents increased. The community currently is about one-third African American. (Hispanics comprise a relatively minimal proportion of the population in both Finneytown and Forest Park.)

In 2000, 77 voucher holders lived in Finneytown. In 2005, that number increased to 130, reflecting the overall increase throughout Hamilton County. In 2011, the number of voucher holders increased comparatively modestly, to 153. The voucher density analysis showed Galbraith Pointe at the center of the highest concentration of vouchers in Finneytown for all three periods. Galbraith Pointe is an apartment complex built in the mid-1990s and financed by the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) Program.<sup>5</sup> The number of voucher holders at Galbraith Pointe increased dramatically from 2000 (55 voucher holders) to 2005 (91) but decreased marginally from 2005 to 2011 (88). Voucher holders account for most of this complex's residents. In 2000, Galbraith Pointe's highest density was 86 vouchers per square kilometer; in 2005, it was 144; and in 2011, it was 139. In 2005 and 2011, Galbraith Pointe clearly met the criteria of a hotspot.

The Glencoe neighborhood exists barely beyond Finneytown's boundary but within Springfield Township.<sup>6</sup> This neighborhood is characterized by post-World War II single-family homes of largely uniform and basic design. Because of their arguably unfashionable design and comparatively smaller size, they may be more difficult to sell than newer single-family homes in more far-flung suburbs. Their status makes this housing type attractive to real estate investors who acquire them

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<sup>5</sup> See Varady (2006) for a discussion of Galbraith Pointe as a problematic LIHTC HCVP hotspot.

<sup>6</sup> Glencoe is actually part of Mt. Healthy, a suburban city facing racial change and income decline. We included the Glencoe neighborhood as part of our case study analysis of Finneytown for three reasons. First, Finneytown does not have widely understood boundaries (it is a school district rather than a town or village) and, for this reason, many people probably assume that Glencoe is part of Finneytown. Second, the distinctively unfashionable homes and the concentration of low-income families in Glencoe likely have an adverse effect on the confidence levels of residents of adjoining parts of Finneytown. Third, Glencoe stands out as a prototypical example of a single-family home HCVP hotspot. This hotspot type has received little attention in the literature, so we included this neighborhood to draw attention to this somewhat unusual type of hotspot.

as rental properties, often renting to low-income families, including HCVP recipients. From 2000 to 2005, Glencoe's housing voucher density rose from 51 to 130 vouchers per square kilometer. From 2005 to 2011, it rose further, to 133. Glencoe is a good example of a single-family HCVP hotspot.

### **Forest Park Area**

The city of Forest Park<sup>7</sup> is about 14 miles north of downtown Cincinnati, connected to the greater metropolitan area by Interstate 275, which encircles Cincinnati. Today, Forest Park is governed by a city council and administered by a city manager. It has its own police and fire departments and a community development department that oversees planning and zoning, among other things. The city is divided between two local school districts—Winton Woods and Northwest.

The land that is now Forest Park was originally designed to be the greenbelt portion of a new federally funded greenbelt town, Greenhills, formed to the south on agricultural land (Miller, 1981). After Congress passed legislation in 1949 authorizing the sale of Greenhills and other greenbelt towns around the United States, the town was sold. Its greenbelt, then called North Greenhills, was bought in 1954 by developer Warner-Kanter. Zoning changes were approved to allow for development, and the name of the area was changed from North Greenhills to Forest Park (Miller, 1981).

Forest Park was planned by its developer from its inception to be a community occupied by active residents involved in cohesive leisure and civic activities. The developer's target buyer was an upwardly mobile, post-World War II, middle-class, white-collar worker. As a comprehensively planned community, Forest Park went through several design iterations in the 1950s and 1960s to navigate the dynamic of the conflicting desires of the developer, the residents, and the civic associations and municipal government. The development initially was more concerned with the balance of residential, commercial, and industrial than with creating a socioeconomic or racial balance. Forest Park was built by subdivision, and each subdivision was fairly homogenous in terms of housing price and age. Forest Park continued to grow and, in 1961, was incorporated as a village. Soon after, in 1968, it reached city status (Miller, 1981).

Although Forest Park began as a largely White community, between 1960 and 1970 the percentage of African-American residents living in Forest Park rose from 0.5 to 2.8 percent. In 1973, in response to claims of realtors "steering" African Americans to specific city neighborhoods and Whites to others, the city council declared its commitment to fair housing practices. During the 1970s, as the African-American population continued to increase in all Forest Park neighborhoods, issues of uneven integration and fears of blight became prevalent. By 1975, the African-American population had reached about 12 percent of the total. Residents voiced opposition to multifamily housing and public housing and support for larger lot sizes to accommodate more expensive homes. Public worries were expressed that blighted areas would lead to a concentrated influx of African-American residents and the formation of African-American ghettos. During this time of change, however, the community also recognized the right of any individual to choose to live where they pleased and avoided setting quotas or seeking to implicitly segregate incoming populations (Miller, 1981).

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<sup>7</sup> This section describes the city of Forest Park. It is important to point out that the Forest Park hotspot includes not only part of this city but also two fairly small adjoining areas, one in Springfield Township and the other in Colerain Township.



Forest Park (population 18,720 in 2010) has become a predominately African-American suburban city. In 2010, it was 24.9 percent White and 65.0 percent African American. Furthermore, during the same time period, Forest Park experienced a growing density of housing voucher families. In 2000, Forest Park's housing voucher density was 21.24 household units per square mile, and the area that would later become a hotspot was fairly small. A dramatic change occurred from 2000 to 2005, especially at the Ashley Woods apartment complex (a gated community in Colerain Township, immediately adjacent to Forest Park). The Sevenhills neighborhood (in Springfield Township but adjoining Forest Park) also experienced an increase in voucher density during this period. From 2005 to 2011, this hotspot grew in area, now encompassing more of Sevenhills and new areas of southwest Forest Park.

As a gated community, the Ashley Woods part of the hotspot is of particular interest. In addition to providing two-story apartment buildings and townhouses, the complex includes a centralized recreational and rental office facility. Ashley Woods has a gate, which is neither monitored nor closed at night. Security measures are in place, such as a card scanner console and separate vehicle and pedestrian entrances. Also prevalent in the complex are posted signs governing acceptable behavior. One sign reads: "This property is protected and enforced by a curfew of 10:00 pm daily for any persons under 18 years of age. This curfew is strictly enforced by law enforcement personnel." A single Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority bus line, the #17, serves the Ashley Woods and Sevenhills neighborhoods. This route starts in downtown Cincinnati and terminates in a loop through Sevenhills. During weekdays, the route runs every 30 to 80 minutes, depending on the time of day, until about 9:00 p.m.; during weekends, it runs less frequently.

## Perceptions of HCVP Clustering and Its Effects

To gain a better understanding of how HCVP operates and affects local communities, we conducted a series of interviews with key informants who are involved with or affected by the HCVP in their professional work. We carried out 13 interviews of 17 individuals between November 2011 and February 2012. Each interview was conducted in person and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Questions were prepared ahead of time, but interviewees had the opportunity to discuss other subjects of interest to them. We recorded the interviews and took detailed notes. Informants were chosen based on their involvement with HCVP in Hamilton County, Springfield Township, Finneytown, Forest Park, and Colerain Township. Interviewees ranged from planning academics to nonprofit advocates and from civic volunteers to public employees.<sup>8</sup> We have organized the interview results around four themes.

1. **HCVP clustering.** To what extent do informants perceive that HCVP households cluster in particular neighborhoods, and if they do cluster, why?
2. **Negative neighborhood spillovers.** To what extent, if at all, do informants perceive that HCVP clustering contributes to poor housing maintenance, crime and incivilities, poorly performing schools, and racial tensions?

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<sup>8</sup> A complete list of the key informants is available on request from Varady.



3. **Community decline.** To what extent is the operation of HCVP believed to be responsible for community decline in the suburbs? Is decline seen, rather, as attributable to other, broader, metropolitanwide shifts?
4. **CMHA's performance.** To what extent are informants satisfied with the way CMHA administers HCVP in the suburbs? What specific complaints do they have and what are their suggestions for improvement?

### **HCVP Clustering**

Discussions with informants about the spatial distribution of vouchers in Hamilton County proved to be surprisingly complex. Informants disagreed on whether voucher recipients were or were not dispersing throughout the county. They also disagreed about what constituted HCVP clustering. Some thought that the jurisdiction or community was the appropriate geographic unit for defining concentrations, but others wanted to focus on the level of block or particular apartment complex.

A fair housing advocate discussed the problem of choosing an appropriate geographic unit with which to define spatial concentrations. She pointed out that an apartment complex may rent predominantly to voucher holders, but it could exist within a larger, predominantly upper income community. She wondered whether the complex should be considered a concentration—and a problem—if the jurisdiction as a whole has a relatively minimal proportion of voucher holders.

Even our [Cincinnati's] big apartment complexes are small compared to other cities. ... You need to look at the mix in the schools and the grocery stores. ... It's really the community mix [that is important] rather than whether there are too many [voucher holders] on [any] one street or not.

A Finneytown Civic Association leader similarly argued that the proportion of voucher holders at the level of Finneytown as a whole was more important than at any one street or apartment complex.

Are we really going down the tubes here? Is Section 8 taking over? It turns out that it's not. There are roughly 5,000 living units in Finneytown and there's, at last count, 146 Section 8 rentals. ... The percentage is like 2.7 percent, which is not a big deal. ... We're not going down the tubes like many, many other neighborhoods are. We're holding our own.

A Finneytown landlord who rents to many voucher holders argued for the existence of a tipping point, a threshold beyond which the rate of community decline would accelerate.<sup>9</sup>

Somewhere between 10 and 25 percent there's a tipping point that a resident who is a working resident gets a feel that "this isn't for me anymore, this is for poor people." Again, this is a perception of others as it relates to your community. So if you [as a landlord] take a voucher holder or two, it's no big deal.

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<sup>9</sup> Similarly, housing researchers George Galster (2005) and Kirk McClure (2010) have used the tipping point concept to analyze the dynamics of high-poverty and high-housing-voucher-density neighborhoods.

A Forest Park public administrator also highlighted the tipping point concept, but went on to note the effects of an uneven voucher distribution within Forest Park (where the tipping had occurred), that neighborhoods containing higher proportions of vouchers had become “service burdens.”

We speak a lot here about community standards and they are definitely there. We spend time and effort at enforcing those standards, but the whole enforcement of them was less necessary in past years, because it was basically the social pressure, if you will, of keeping that up. And that’s why I think the distribution is important. We spend a lot more of our code enforcement effort [in the section of the city with more voucher residents]. There are streets [with fewer voucher residents] where we barely have to go onto, because you have a community standard that is being upheld without any effort from the municipal government. . . . These are the community standards that we and our city council are trying to uphold. There will come a tipping point at some point where it’s not the community standard anymore and we’ll have enough residents saying “No, you shouldn’t be having us take our garbage cans in” or “You shouldn’t be telling me I have to paint the house.” At some point litter[ing] is going to become the norm.

A Springfield Township official similarly emphasized not only looking at subneighborhoods rather than jurisdictions, but also the need to limit HCVP migration flows into particular subareas. Current HUD regulations preclude doing this, that is, limiting migration to a certain area. HCVP recipients can move wherever they like as long as they find a landlord willing to rent to them.

An obvious solution to us was to, not necessarily maybe even limit the number that a community can have, because if you still wanted to allow people to go wherever they wanted to go you could do that, as they do now, but to say, “You should limit the number of housing choice vouchers that are allowed to be in any one census tract or block group.” That way you would prevent this type of clustering.

Why do HCVP families cluster in HCVP hotspots? CMHA informants argued that the availability of rental housing that meets the Fair Market Rent standard determines where voucher holders will locate. Communities that do not offer affordable rental housing cannot accommodate voucher holders.

Anderson Township [a mostly middle-income area to the East of Cincinnati] is 90 percent single-family residences. And I think there’s like 5 or 10 vouchers in Anderson Township and sixteen thousand housing units. Westwood [a neighborhood on Cincinnati’s West Side] is about 60-percent rental. Nobody planned this, but Anderson Township developed as single-family ownership and Westwood developed as apartments and those apartments meet the rent standard and without anything—CMHA doesn’t do anything—that’s where the apartments are. That’s where the lower cost apartments are.

Some informants mentioned that voucher holders may be more likely to locate in larger apartment complexes rather than smaller rental properties because of the process involved for landlords in participating in HCVP. As one CMHA representative explained—

Sometimes larger apartment communities are just more willing to accept the voucher than maybe a small “mom-and-pop” unit because there is a lot of red tape, and the

process is slowed down a little bit—the approvals that need to be done and the inspections and all of that. And some mom-and-pop single-unit owners aren't necessarily interested in participating in the voucher program. They have that right to do that, and in the larger apartment communities they have a better understanding of how the program works and they know how to work with us.

A Finneytown landlord indicated that properties financed using a LIHTC are substantially more likely to accept vouchers and to accept higher proportions of vouchers, because of the tax credit's requirements and financing structure. By contrast to conventionally financed rental properties, owners of LIHTC-financed properties are not allowed to turn away HCVP households based on their using vouchers.

A conventionally financed property [owner] can choose not to accept a Housing Choice Voucher holder. A Section 42 [LIHTC] financed property, by deed restriction, is required to accept Section 8 voucher holders. [This statute] doesn't require that every voucher holder that knocks on the door is rented to, but you have to accept the application. And you still have rental criteria that you can use to pick and choose who you would rent to.

HCVP consequently serves as a means for landlords of LIHTC properties to meet the tax credit's tenant income ceiling requirement while charging more rent than tenants in that income bracket would otherwise likely be able to pay. The unfortunate consequence of these LIHTC regulations is to promote income and racial segregation at the project level.

## **Spillover Effects**

We asked informants about some of the spillover effects often attributed to HCVP, such as increased crime, culture conflicts, poor housing conditions, and declining school performance.

### **Crime**

Crime turned out to be less of a problem than expected. A CMHA representative simply dismissed the possibility of a link between housing vouchers and crime.

There's no evidence that says there's any higher crime in public housing or housing choice vouchers. There's nothing that says that occurs. That's [just] a perception.

During the early 2000s, Galbraith Pointe was in a state of turmoil because of an increase in crime. In April 2006, Chevis Jackson, who was a sophomore and star athlete at Finneytown High School, was shot to death during a gang dispute in the parking lot of the complex (Varady, 2006). He was an innocent bystander. In June, his mother sued Galbraith Pointe for not providing adequate security. For budgetary reasons, the complex had stopped hiring off-duty police officers to patrol the property earlier in the year (Horn, 2006).

The fact that our informants did not prominently emphasize crime may have been because of recent policy efforts. A Springfield Township police officer mentioned Finneytown's Galbraith Pointe but said that crime no longer was a serious problem.

Galbraith Point—we don't have any more runs there than we do at any other apartment complex. . . . I don't know what the exact numbers are of voucher recipients there versus ones that are not. . . . It's a lot quieter now than it was when they first opened. . . . There are not a lot of problems there. There really isn't.

The Springfield Township police officer explained that when crime occurs at a voucher-assisted housing unit, the department shares the information with CMHA using a system that has served as a model for surrounding police departments. "Early on, when we identify a location where there [are] a lot of issues, it gets taken care of pretty quick [sic]. [CMHA removes the voucher] and we have no more problems there." This officer went on to explain that—

[CMHA is] really stringent on drug activity. If we do an investigation and we find that there's drug sales and drug-related violence at a location, they're quick about it. They'll do the immediate termination hearings and things like that.

CMHA's screening procedures may also help to minimize crime. One Finneytown landlord who accepts HCVP households relies on his own tenant-screening process and on CMHA's process to ensure low levels of criminal activity at his properties.

I screen my tenant very thoroughly and so do they [CMHA]. There are no drug dealers and criminals and sex offenders living in Section 8 housing. I don't think a lot of people understand that. If you've got a stack of stuff on your record, you're not getting a voucher.

### **Culture Conflicts**

Considerable consensus existed among informants that lifestyle clashes sometimes occur between newly arrived HCVP recipients and long-term owner residents. Whereas CMHA representatives and fair housing advocates tended to explain away these clashes, however, landlords and public officials saw them as an obstacle to long-term community stability.

According to one fair housing advocate, culture clashes sometimes occur because of differing yard space usage habits.

If you've lived an urban lifestyle and you're having a cookout, you do it in a very public place and the neighbors understand they can come over. . . . [However, if you are a voucher family and] you try to have a cookout anywhere but hidden in your back yard in a suburban neighborhood . . . people are all over you. You know, just understanding the difference between the front yard and the back yard and how you use those different spaces, I mean, it's very different.

This same fair housing advocate alleged that neighbors of voucher holders in suburban settings have been known in some cases to excessively report their voucher holding neighbors to the police based on assumptions of criminal activity because of differences in yard maintenance and noise standards.

Other informants were more explicit about the kinds of social conflicts between neighbors that suburban residents have attributed to voucher holders. A Finneytown Civic Association representative mentioned that, within his community, resistance to HCVP has largely been voiced by unsubsidized

residents living in close proximity to voucher holders, who most typically cite litter and loud noise in their complaints. He said, “We have had some rough Section 8 people that would play their music loud, be a little belligerent, litter a lot, that’s about it.” These complaints are reminiscent of those made by middle-class gentrifiers in Harlem (New York City) (see Freeman, 2006); and Bronzeville (Chicago) (see Pattillo, 2007) about their lower income rental neighbors.

Other informants complained about loud music, yelling from a parked car to a house, and shouting during domestic disputes. One Finneytown landlord who works with HCVP explored this cultural divide between socioeconomic classes in dealing with domestic conflict.

Because they [HCV recipients] are coming from a lower socioeconomic class, they deal with conflict in a different manner than perhaps [would be true for a family coming] from an upper or middle class upbringing. ... If you are from that poor family, whether its white, blue, green or black, you deal with it differently. It’s bravado, it’s a push back, and that creates a sense [for the neighbor] that “I wouldn’t want my daughter living there.”

CMHA recognizes the existence of these culture clashes by carrying out its own orientation program for HCVP clients.

When we do an orientation, we try to help individuals prepare to be a good resident, to be a good community person. Different levels of skills, living in a community, living as a renter, there’s different skill levels. Some of the people we give vouchers do better than others.

Whether these orientation sessions are thorough enough to prevent culture clashes is an open question.

### **Substandard Housing Conditions**

Our key informants cited the physical inspections regularly undertaken by CMHA and rejected the widely held belief that voucher homes are not well maintained. A Finneytown landlord said—

They inspect the houses. The run down, nasty looking houses with the broken front porches and rotten stairways and falling apart gutters, those are not Section 8 houses. They would never pass. You have to have a house in nice shape. ... When people see a run down house, their first thought is, “Oh, that’s probably a rental.” A lot of times it’s not. A lot of times a run-down house is owned by an owner-occupant who just can’t afford to keep it up for whatever reason.

One high-ranking CMHA representative explained the housing conditions inspection this way—

We do inspections every year for every apartment and we basically make sure it’s livable. And so if it’s not livable the landlord has to correct it and if the landlord doesn’t correct it, we’ll stop paying rent. The person still holds the voucher but we tell them that if the plumbing’s not working or there are safety issues, we’ll just say, “You can’t live there anymore, you have to move.” We will not pay the rent on a sub-standard living arrangement.

Nevertheless, many of our informants (other than CMHA staff) believed that, even if voucher houses met program standards, often they were not kept up—especially on the outside—as well as those

that were owner occupied. Problems included overgrown lawns and garbage, toys, and junk cars left outside. A Colerain Township administrator asserted that voucher holders were generally less likely to maintain their properties than neighboring homeowners.

Many times ... a voucher person will move into a neighborhood [and] they're not used to taking care of a single-family home. ... With our property maintenance code and [their not] cutting grass and [their] not [putting] garbage out, we see many times that these involve voucher homes.

A Springfield Township official echoed this concern: "They [HCVP-rented units] are six-to-seven percent of the total households in the township [but] they represent about ten-to-eleven percent of the total code violations that we have, on average, every year."

A public administrator from nearby Forest Park distinguished simply between renter-occupied and owner-occupied housing when making a similar claim for his jurisdiction.

The effect is there is often a noticeable difference between a house that's owned by an owner-occupant, and a landlord, and it's obvious, but it's also sometimes a little bit subtle. It's the difference between planting flowers or not planting flowers, mowing the lawn once-a-week or every-other-week, fixing small things on a timely basis versus waiting until either the tenant complains or we bring it up.

A CMHA representative acknowledged the previous points but claimed that housing conditions might be even worse in suburban communities like Finneytown and Forest Park if HCVP did not exist.

[Under that scenario] you're going to have landlords who are going to be forced to accept less rent, because they can't rent their properties because people don't have the means to be able to pay the rent. So this program gives landlords the ability to charge Fair Market Rent and have money to put back into their properties and keep them up to standards and improve them in many cases. If those dollars weren't available, I think you'd see a steady decline in some of the housing stock.

This argument would probably provide little comfort to a homeowner adjoining a poorly maintained HCVP property.

## **Schools**

One effect of HCVP in suburban areas is the influx of children from more disadvantaged families into school systems that had previously been predominantly middle class. Many of the communities, like Finneytown and Forest Park, that have experienced an influx of HCVP households were already undergoing racial change. Administrators from the Finneytown Local School District spoke of the opening of Galbraith Pointe. As an LIHTC property that rents disproportionately to voucher holders, Galbraith Pointe brought many disadvantaged children into the school district who were more transient, who performed below grade level, and who were culturally different from children already in the school district. The school district adapted by implementing new cultural training for the school staff, making changes in school curricula, and implementing programs designed to

meet the needs of children from poorer families. The nearby Northminster Presbyterian Church also developed new after-school and summer programs in response to changes in school population demographics.

Two Finneytown school officials described the changes that the district had made in curricular and disciplinary policies, but they emphasized that they were a result of changing demographics in general and not HCVP in particular.

A Finneytown Civic Association representative thought that racial tensions and disciplinary issues were the main schooling issues.

In school, I think there's some friction between the kids. The only fights that [this informant's son] ever got in were with Section 8 kids, and they weren't serious. I think there's an attempt at some bullying, but there's enough kids around to say, "What the hell are you doing?" and eventually that stops. It's pretty much one way [the bullying]—[it's the] Section 8 kids. That's part of a culture I think that says: "You've got to look out for yourself and you've got to look out for yourself even if somebody's not threatening you."

Race is a dynamic that influences discussions of HCVP within any number of subtopics, but the subject was raised prominently in connection with school issues. A Springfield Township administrator explained the public perception issue as it relates to HCVP and race, within the context of the Finneytown schools.

You see kids that undoubtedly live at Galbraith Pointe, because you see them going back to there walking from the high school to Galbraith Pointe. You know, young, minority kids with their hat backward and their pants down, people automatically assume that they're doing something illegal. It's a perception issue.

This civic association representative also spoke of an apparent racial divide among students that has become apparent since the influx of African-American children into Finneytown.

Right after school, you see a bunch of white kids here and a bunch of black kids over there and there's a little mingling on the fringes. It's not like they're all together. And I was always uncomfortable with that.

Key informants differed regarding whether flight from local public schools was or was not race related. The Finneytown Civic Association representative estimated that maybe 20 percent of households moving away from Finneytown during this period were motivated by voucher holder immigration into Finneytown, a motivation that this informant characterized as race based. On the other hand, the Forest Park administrator asserted that this flight was not race based, it was instead a response to declining school performance, which in turn reflected growing proportions of economically disadvantaged and transient children in the school district.

We will not be able to resolve this question of whether middle-class flight from inner-suburb schools is or is not racially motivated. What is clear, however, is that unless methods are developed to slow flight, but more importantly to sustain middle-class interest in public schools serving these areas, community decline is inevitable. We now turn to a more direct discussion of this subject: the effect of HCVP on community decline.



### **Does HCVP Cause Neighborhood Decline?**

Our interviews and the academic literature on housing vouchers (see, for example, McClure, 2010) raise the question: To what extent is HCVP a cause of neighborhood decline above and beyond other factors? Our informants suggested other causes of decline, including the influx of investor owners of rental properties and the growing undesirability of the early postwar single-family housing stock. Ellen et al. (2011) made precisely the same point: that the influx of HCVP tenants is typically a symptom rather than a dominant cause of decline.

Some informants referred to investor landlords playing a key role in the decline of particular Cincinnati suburban communities. According to a Forest Park public administrator, the recent wave of foreclosures depressed housing values and made properties in that jurisdiction more attractive to investor landlords, many of whom rent to voucher holders.

In the past few years ... you've had the foreclosure and housing crisis. ... That did a couple of things. It depressed the prices that people could get, the extra inventory made it more difficult for people to sell houses, and so what we had was a lot of investors purchasing houses. Now some of them came in, put some work into the house, and then put it back on the market. Others were landlords [who were] focused on Section 8.

This administrator also theorized that (1) investor landlords would not find a profitable business in Forest Park if not for the subsidy that HCVP provides, and (2) the investor landlords operating in Forest Park in recent years have brought problems to Forest Park by way of their poor experience and skills as landlords.

I wouldn't go so far as to say this [HCVP] has had a negative effect on the community, but again, I think it's drawn in real estate investors that, again, are not real good at it [sic]. And without this subsidy, I don't know that they would have ever been doing that. And not all of these people [the landlords] are using Housing Choice Vouchers, but what [the subsidy does is] raise the floor on the rental price for a single-family house.

A Springfield Township police officer noted a similar wave of foreclosures in Finneytown, which has attracted investors, many of whom are renting single-family homes to voucher holders. A Finneytown Civic Association leader similarly speculated that about 25 percent of the foreclosed homes in Finneytown's southwestern section (the hardest hit area) would be turned over to voucher holders.

A Finneytown landlord acknowledged that investor landlords tend to purchase single-family homes in areas where property values have decreased enough for the investor to make a profit in renting or reselling the house. He went out of his way, however, to emphasize that investor landlords are a symptom, not a cause, of change.

In some ways the purchase of these properties by landlords is a symptom of a different situation. It's a symptom of changing demographics and changing economics in that community. If there were still lots of white middle-class people to buy the houses in Finneytown, and [who] wanted to live in Finneytown, then those houses wouldn't have become run down properties that were in the price range that investors can buy, because investors

can't buy full price houses and make money. So it's only when the houses start to decline in price because they've declined in quality ... there's no longer the market to buy them at the higher price. So I use the phrase that the investors are a symptom of something, of that change, whereas the perception is we [the investors] came in and brought down the values of the neighborhood. The reality, I think, is we came in while the values were already down and it started a cycle that continued.

The growing undesirability of the single-family housing stock in inner-ring suburbs like Finneytown is a major cause behind socioeconomic decline in those communities. One CMHA representative further explained that many landlords who participate in HCVP are former owner occupants who found they could not easily resell the house in which they used to live and for which they also could not easily attract a market-rate tenant.

A Springfield Township informant referred to older, mid-20th century single-family homes as “low hanging fruit” for investor landlords. This phenomenon was corroborated by a CMHA administrator, who explained that—

I think, if I remember correctly, voucher holders choosing to move there [Finneytown] is because a lot of the homes—the single-family homes—they're slab houses with no basements. They're just less desirable, I think, for homeownership now ... the trend has been for those to be turning more toward rental. When people in this area are buying a home, they want a basement.

Another CMHA representative present at this interview added—

You see investors picking up more of those types of homes. They're owned by investment groups. You don't typically see an investor picking up a \$100,000 home and leasing it out. You know, those are more [likely to be] owner occupied.

The Springfield Township representative explained that the housing stock in Finneytown was largely built to meet middle-class standards of the 1960s and 1970s, and that families of that status now prefer newer housing in more far-flung suburbs like West Chester (a rapidly growing suburb at the northern edge of the metropolitan area, on the other side of the Interstate 275 ring road). This change in housing preferences has decreased property values in Finneytown even further, making them affordable to lower income owners and renters.

A lot of it [the decline] is just because it's an older housing stock and there's really not a market for it anymore, and it's sort of ripe [for the] picking for a Housing Choice-Voucher type program because the person moving out of Winton Terrace [a neighborhood near to the city center] or out of the urban core and moving into one of those two or three bedroom Cape Cods—to them, that's like moving to West Chester. But to the Finneytown resident who lived next door to that house for thirty years and Miss Jones owned it and planted flowers every spring in the flower bed and now she's died and no one else wants that house, and someone who's never owned a house before comes and lives in it, doesn't take care of the bushes, doesn't cut the grass regularly, you know, barbecues in the front yard, that's a big change from Miss Jones, who planted flowers every spring. And every situation like that gets labeled Section 8.

A Finneytown landlord emphasized the fact that declining property values have made single-family homes in inner-ring suburbs like Finneytown accessible to voucher holders. Moreover, property value decline has accelerated in neighborhoods in which the housing stock was built using lower quality construction materials and shoddy methods.

That's a big misperception—what caused the influx of these poor subsidized housing tenants. The neighborhoods were already in decline before investors started buying up the property. And part of it is, some of that stuff wasn't built all that good [sic] to begin with. [This was] not premium quality construction. Some of the houses in these neighborhoods, they weren't built with two-by-fours, they were built with two-by-threes, press board walls, aluminum wiring, really simple features, small rooms, concrete slabs, no garages. Some have car ports, some don't.

Thus, changing middle-class tastes in single-family housing, an aging single-family housing stock, and continued single-family development at the metropolitan fringe all contribute to the decline of inner-ring suburbs like Finneytown and Forest Park. Continuing decline in many inner suburbs is therefore inevitable. Programs to limit the entry of HCVP families into such areas after the proportion exceeds a specific tipping point would not work unless ways are identified to make these areas more attractive to White, middle-class families with children.<sup>10</sup>

### **How Well Is CMHA Administering HCVP?**

CMHA officials viewed HCVP more favorably than did landlords and community officials. CMHA representatives stressed that their primary obligations were to the federal government and to the voucher holders, rather than to landlords and communities. They noted that the program was being run well, in accordance with HCVP guidelines; so well, in fact, that CMHA had achieved a score of 145 out of 145 in the most recent Section 8 Management Assessment Program (SEMAP).<sup>11</sup> A CMHA official similarly added: "We're a high performer. We meet all the HUD standards. It's an excellent operation." CMHA's high performance rating stands despite criticisms from public administrators and landlords because HUD and local informants are using different criteria of effectiveness. The subsections that follow speak to the deficiencies raised in interviews.

### **Public Relations**

CMHA's inability to build and maintain positive public relations in suburban communities in regard to its administration of HCVP was a source of complaint for many informants. One Springfield Township official, recalling a 2009 meeting that CMHA officials attended in Finneytown, remembered that CMHA administrators were overly defensive when discussing HCVP.

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<sup>10</sup> A Finneytown resident offered a novel twist to this argument, favoring a quota for HCVP households. According to the informant, the number of voucher families needed to be restricted, because they tended not to become involved in school activities or to work for the passage of school levies.

<sup>11</sup> According to HUD, SEMAP "measures the performance of the public housing agencies (PHAs) that administer the Housing Choice Voucher program in 14 key areas. SEMAP helps HUD target monitoring and assistance to PHA programs that need the most improvement" (HUD, n.d.).

Overall, it's my opinion that CMHA doesn't recognize or doesn't admit the problem of the clustering of these units in suburban neighborhoods. We've had them out here for meetings before to explain the program to the public and to answer questions, and they get defensive really quick. As an organization, I don't know that they readily admit or subscribe to the perception.

On the other hand, CMHA officials thought that meetings had gone well and that the authority was proactively fostering community dialogue concerning HCVP.

We don't always wait for them to request [a meeting]. We do proactively outreach [sic] to community councils and civic associations, however, there's a fine line there because essentially you're saying we want to come talk to you, but sometimes they say, "No thank you!", and you don't get the opportunity to present at their meeting and other times you do. We reach out and let them know we're here, that we'd be happy to come out and educate.

### **Red Tape**

Two Cincinnati-area landlords who had extensive experience with HCVP and who managed rental properties in Finneytown stressed the difficulty of navigating the program's red tape. To the landlords, the process of accepting a voucher involves not only added paperwork and communications with CMHA officials, but also delays in moving tenants in and receiving rent payments. One landlord complained, "They're a very difficult agency to work with. They are slow, cumbersome." He did admit, however, that the obvious benefit of HCVP from a landlord's perspective is that after the tenant has moved in, rent payments are guaranteed regardless of the tenant's employment status.

It adds a month to the cycle of getting a tenant approved. I've got to wade through all their paperwork and they're very inefficient. But if I have a tenant who is Section 8 and they get laid off, Section 8 picks up the rest of the rent. ... If they're a market rate tenant and they get laid off, they're pretty well done.

The same landlord complained about the lack of a partnership relationship between CMHA and landlords in implementing HCVP.

They don't treat the property owners as clients. To them, the tenant is the client and we're just this service provider, so we are not appreciated as a key part of their business model. The fact that their tenants and their program cost us a lot of money—they don't care.

Another voucher-accepting landlord, who manages rental property in Finneytown, echoed this sentiment.

CMHA, in administering the program, in my opinion, perceives their customer as the voucher holder—not the landlord, nor the community [where] the properties reside. And, to that end, they shoot themselves in the foot. The voucher concept is ... very problematic, full of prejudice—community prejudice—[a] hot potato. You need to perceive me as your customer, because without me ... you have no program. If I won't take your voucher, there will be no one to take your voucher.

The solution to this relationship dilemma, according to this landlord, is that caseworkers be assigned to landlords in the same way that they are assigned to voucher holders. He mentioned that upper level representatives from large, national property management firms with large apartment complexes (such as Towne Properties in Cincinnati) can contact upper level CMHA administrators and receive attention, but landlords of smaller properties do not have this same access.

### Accepting Responsibility

It is clear based on informant interviews that CMHA accepts the responsibility to regularly inspect the homes in which voucher holders reside to guarantee their proper structural condition. It is also clear that local police departments accept responsibility for monitoring criminal activity and for sharing that information with CMHA, whose staff have the responsibility for removing offending voucher holders from the program. The question of who is responsible for dealing with cultural conflicts among neighbors and for exterior property maintenance issues, however, has not yet been adequately resolved.

According to a CMHA official, mitigating public nuisance violations, such as noise levels and yard maintenance, is the responsibility of a landlord, because such issues are violations of lease agreements between the tenant and landlord and are not the responsibility of CMHA.

[Nuisance calls against a voucher holder are] not our responsibility with this [CMHA-landlord] contract and it's not our responsibility with this [CMHA-tenant] contract. Now, if there are some other violations like drug violations, ok, we're pulling the voucher.

Another CMHA official explained that the housing authority does actively mediate between local public administrators and HCVP landlords but stressed that the responsibility for nonstructural code issues lies with the landlord.

Our inspections department works with local municipalities as far as building code violations. They provide us with a list if one of our properties ... has any code violations. ... If it's a complaint that deals with lease enforcement, then we explain to the landlord that lease enforcement is the responsibility of the property owner. We try and educate our property owners as well: "Look, you need to make sure that you are not an [absentee] landlord. If the responsibility is of the family to [maintain] the exterior, you need to drive by and make sure they're doing that."

Among the public administrators we interviewed, this answer was not satisfactory. They cited the difficulty in working with landlords on correcting code violations and the inability of CMHA to productively participate in the correction process. A Colerain Township official said—

One of the frustrations that I've seen in the time that I've been here is it seems that [CMHA's] responsiveness to me has gone down. And it's a process and we've worked with them. But when I have a landlord that's not taking care of their property, they just say to me now "Well you just have to deal with that landlord." ... Those [HCVP] landlords are very difficult to work with, and CMHA gives us very little support.

An official from the nearby Northwest Local School District also complained about CMHA's inability to influence HCVP landlords to correct code violations.

There's very little control they have over the landlords, and I think that's what the communities are most concerned with. Why don't they have a little more concern and control over them?

A Springfield Township administrator suggested that CMHA deny vouchers to residents on the basis of code violations or that CMHA require landlords to register their property as rental homes. Such requirements would make landlords easier to track down by code enforcement officials. Such a landlord registry is currently used in Minneapolis (Krueger, 2010).

### **Baby Steps Toward Housing Voucher and Poverty Deconcentration**

Although CMHA has taken steps to promote broader housing choices—which would prevent the emergence of HCVP hotspots—these efforts have not been as energetic as they could be. A CMHA representative ticked off the types of assistance provided to voucher families.

We have a website [<http://www.gosection8.com>] that provides a listing of all available housing that property owners can register for and for program participants to lease. . . . We have a kiosk area on site at our HCV administrative offices where families can access that site and print off listings. We also encourage families to check local newspapers for rentals and check other local publications—Craig's List, Apartment Guide, for-rent magazines. "Don't limit yourselves to just looking at what we provide and what property owners have listed on our website as available units. There are other opportunities through other avenues."

This CMHA administrator explained how the housing authority may refer a voucher holder to the local nonprofit fair housing organization, Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME), which maintains a program for assisting voucher holders in finding housing.

We also have a mobility program with Housing Opportunities Made Equal. We refer clients to HOME if they're looking to move outside of the city limits, and they have a mobility specialist that will work with that family to find housing in the areas that they are seeking.

Although HOME can provide families with more choices, the agency cannot force families to move to areas with low poverty rates or low minority populations.

A CMHA administrator explained that the housing authority is authorized to take steps that utilize the HCVP to deconcentrate poverty in Hamilton County.

We have a deconcentration plan. . . . We try to find a way to say "let's get more landlords from areas of the city that don't have a lot of vouchers, let's go out and actively try to do that." . . . If you focus on something [wider choices] you should be able to move the needle a little bit. We just need to focus there.

To recruit landlords in areas of lower poverty concentrations, CMHA is authorized to pay higher rent vouchers in these areas. The CMHA administrator was careful to note that this policy did not constitute steering.

We can pay as much as 110 percent of the Fair Market Rent in low poverty concentration areas. We don't do that a lot, but we can do that. We also can do a mobility deconcentration plan where we try to recruit landlords where there are areas of lower concentrations. We can't do [it] wholesale. By all means we can never do anything called "steering." We can never say, "This voucher is only good for this neighborhood."

A Colerain Township official voiced opposition to CMHA's use of rent exception areas, claiming that the housing authority designated those areas using old data. Because CMHA continued to use 1990 census data to determine an area's level of poverty, (a point in time when there were few in-migrating poor families), the housing authority was encouraging voucher holders to move there as part of a deconcentration plan. The Colerain Township administrator had in mind the Northbrook area of the township.

I definitely think that exception area is antiquated, using outdated data, and it amazes me that they're still using it [given that it is] basically [being] inundated with voucher [recipients].

The preceding suggests the need to use up-to-date data to monitor community change and to supplement census data with other relevant information (for example, school enrollment data) wherever possible.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article has been to explore the views of Hamilton County public officials, landlords, housing activists, and civic leaders concerning the link between HCVP and negative neighborhood spillovers (for example, crime and property maintenance standards) in the inner suburbs. We have placed these interview results in the context of broader city-suburban shifts in HCVP in Hamilton County between 2000 and 2011 and in the context of the particular changes that have occurred in Finneytown and Forest Park, two racially changing suburbs. This article is meant to supplement empirical studies of the neighborhood spillover effects (for example, on property values, see Galster, Tatian, and Smith, 1999) and large-scale surveys of voucher recipients' ability to achieve better housing and neighborhood conditions (see, for example, Varady and Walker, 2007).

The story of community change in the suburbs proves to be a complex one, within which HCVP is only one player. Most informants endorsed HCVP as an efficient and effective way to provide good-quality, affordable housing. The interviews, however, spotlighted a number of perceived problems associated with an influx of HCVP households into inner suburbs: cultural clashes between neighbors, poor exterior maintenance, and poor school performance. It is significant that several of our informants noted that HCVP may be more properly viewed as a symptom, rather than a cause, of community decline in inner-ring suburbs. Academicians like Ingrid Gould Ellen have come around to the same viewpoint in recent years. That is, HCVP families are drawn to areas that were already experiencing low levels of demand because of racial change and an aging housing stock. Middle-class families simultaneously were being drawn away to the metropolitan fringe, where new homes and more prestigious public schools were the norm. Reversing or slowing community decline in this type of suburban environment will not be easy.



Five sets of policy implications may be derived from this study. First, housing authorities like the CMHA need to find ways to hold participating landlords accountable for local code violations such as noise and inadequate property maintenance. As one public administrator suggested, simply requiring HCVP landlords to comply with Ohio state regulation—that is, to register their property as rental housing—would make landlords easier for code enforcement officials to contact. Second, housing authorities need to emphasize the importance of educational outreach and public relations, which would include stressing the authority’s strict screening policies against drug use and criminality. Third, housing authorities need to view the HCVP landlord as a client, just as they view the HCVP recipient as one. One promising approach is to assign a caseworker to each landlord, just as authorities assign caseworkers to HCVP recipients. This strategy would ensure that landlords can have a consistent point of contact with the housing authority while participating in the program. Fourth, housing officials need to use current census, schooling, crime, property value, and other information to monitor possible neighborhood spillover effects. Finally, housing authorities need to work with school districts and local governments to help school districts meet the needs of lower income children living in HCVP units. These programs, if adequately funded, could slow the pattern of decline in these communities.

We offer these recommendations cautiously because (1) some of them are resource intensive at a time when HUD’s current level of funding is under severe threat, and (2) the suggestions are based on a small sample of officials from one metropolitan area. A need clearly exists for further research involving a wider range of cities and regions assessing housing officials’ perceptions of HCVP spillover effects.

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## Authors

David P. Varady is a professor in the School of Planning at the University of Cincinnati.

Xinhao Wang is a professor in the School of Planning at the University of Cincinnati.

Dugan Murphy is a graduate of the Master’s in Community Planning Program at the University of Cincinnati.

Andrew Stahlke is a graduate of the Master’s in Community Planning Program at the University of Cincinnati.

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