

Commentary: Crime As a Dimension of Neighborhood Quality

Jill Khadduri

Abt Associates Inc.

The overall theme of the very interesting and important articles in this symposium is rental housing assistance and crime, but the articles fall into two discreet topic areas: (1) crime as a dimension of the neighborhood quality of assisted housing and (2) the potential of assisted housing to help families or individuals with criminal background histories stabilize their lives. I will focus on the first topic and comment briefly on the second.

Exposure to crime is one main reason housing policymakers should be concerned about the neighborhood quality of assisted residents. When asked about the reasons they prefer some locations to others, families most often talk about wanting a safe neighborhood for their children (Mills et al., 2006). The exposure of children to crime was also a catalyst for the redevelopment of distressed public housing.¹

The public perception that poor families moving into a neighborhood bring crime with them is an equally important reason for concern about the relationship between the location of assisted housing and crime. That widely held perception is one of the political weaknesses of the voucher program and, in my view, the primary reason that the growth of the voucher program did not continue after the program reached a certain size. Political support for the program eroded among politicians who formerly supported the voucher approach because of its emphasis on the private market and its cost-effectiveness. Articles in this symposium point to the substantial growth in the size of the voucher program between the mid-1980s and 2009, but they fail to put the 2.1 million current vouchers in the context of the need for more units of assistance. The Bipartisan Housing Commission has recommended expanding the voucher program to serve the approximately 3.5 million unassisted renters with extremely low incomes who need the program and would use it (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2013; Buron, Kaul, and Khadduri, 2013). Even if current federal budget problems ease, that expansion is likely to come about only if negative perceptions of the voucher program ease as well.

¹ Alex Koltowitz's *There Are No Children Here* (1991), which described the exposure of children to violent crime in Chicago public housing, profoundly changed the political dynamic and made it possible to start tearing down some of the worst public housing developments.

In the public mind, housing vouchers unfortunately became closely associated with the relocation of families from the most notorious public housing projects (Rosin, 2008). This perception is a weakness even of the academic literature on the voucher program, which focuses to an excessive degree on families who relocate from the most distressed public housing projects. The Moving to Opportunity and HOPE VI relocation studies are excellent bodies of research, but they helped create a perception that the voucher program is all about public housing relocation. Ellen, Lens, and O'Regan (2012), cited by several of the articles in this symposium, is a notable exception and found that the voucher population overall does not bring crime to neighborhoods. The article by Christopher Hayes, Graham McDonald, Susan Popkin, Leah Hendey, and Allison Stolte and the article by Ann Owens contribute further by showing that, even for public housing families relocated with vouchers, the evidence on increases in crime rates in the receiving neighborhoods is ambiguous rather than conclusive (Hayes et al., 2013; Owens, 2013).

On the other hand, what the articles in this symposium show about the neighborhood quality of the voucher program is a cause for major concern and policy intervention. The articles by Michael C. Lens and by David P. Varady, Xinhao Wang, Dugan Murphy, and Andrew Stahlke look from the perspective of neighborhood crime, rather than using neighborhood poverty as a proxy for multiple dimensions of quality (Lens, 2013; Varady et al., 2013). These articles show that families using vouchers tend to locate in declining neighborhoods, where housing is getting cheaper, where owners of rental housing do not have a robust market for their units, and where the voucher program appears to provide a business opportunity for investors by offering them above-market rents for the housing units they acquire. Furthermore, vouchers are concentrating in particular buildings within these neighborhoods and communities. Varady et al. (2013) show that this concentration results, in part, from the interaction of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) Program and the voucher program. LIHTC owners are prohibited by law from rejecting a prospective tenant who proposes to use a voucher to pay the rent, and public housing authorities (PHAs) may identify LIHTC properties as convenient places to send families shopping for housing to rent with their vouchers.

This pattern of voucher use in declining neighborhoods, including weakening inner suburbs, is unfortunate, both because voucher families are not avoiding neighborhoods in which they are exposed to crime and because the pattern exacerbates the stigma attached to vouchers. Vouchers are seen as the cause rather than the result of neighborhood decline. Schoolmates identify children from voucher families as "project kids" because many such children come from the same apartment building.

Fortunately, many policy levers and administrative practices can help counteract the pattern of voucher families concentrating in declining neighborhoods.

- One of the most important policy levers is for the PHAs that administer the voucher program to enforce the program's rent reasonableness test when determining the rent they will pay an owner. A statement by a PHA official, quoted by Varady et al. (2013), about the ability of landlords to get higher rents from the voucher program is an example of the very common weakness of not paying enough attention to the location of the housing when determining its market-comparable rent.
- PHAs should broaden the information on where rental housing is available beyond lists of owners who are particularly interested in having voucher tenants. The practice described by Varady et al. (2013) is a positive example of such PHA practice.

- PHAs should refuse to sign housing assistance payment contracts in crime “hotspots.” I recently interviewed a voucher program director in a high-poverty northeastern community who does exactly that. She is a notable exception to the nearly universal PHA practice of ignoring neighborhood quality when applying the voucher program’s housing quality standards.
- Lens (2013) proposes paying closer attention to the location of LIHTC developments, and I agree. The state agencies that administer the LIHTC program should strengthen selection policies that discourage locating (or preserving) multifamily rental developments in locations where rental housing is already inexpensive. The Qualified Allocation Plans (QAPs) that guide the location of LIHTC housing include market studies that focus on whether property proposed for subsidy will have occupancy problems. They do not focus enough, however, on whether the LIHTC property would weaken an otherwise vulnerable neighborhood by concentrating voucher households there. This area may be one in which the federal legislation that creates the framework for QAPs should be changed (Khadduri, 2013).

Articles in this symposium recommend other practices that can combat the perception that voucher families are poor tenants and bad neighbors.

- The close coordination with the police department to identify households that should lose their vouchers, as described in Varady et al. (2013), is an example of such good practice.
- Varady et al. (2013) recommend that PHAs treat landlords and neighborhood associations as partners and make efforts to solve real or perceived problems, even when doing so goes beyond their narrow responsibility for enforcing program rules. This idea is an old recommendation (see Churchill, Holin, Khadduri, and Turnham [2001], a study by Abt Associates, Inc., cited in Varady et al. [2013]) and remains an important one.

In a world in which the number of individuals and families who need housing assistance exceeds the number who can receive subsidies, policymakers are interested in using housing assistance to do more than make housing affordable. Attention focuses on “special needs” populations, including people who experience homelessness, people with disabilities, people with fragile health, and families involved with the child welfare system. In recent years, most of the growth of the voucher program (other than its use to replace public housing and privately owned assisted projects) has been through special allocations of vouchers for special needs populations, most recently homeless veterans.

Marah A. Curtis, Sarah Garlington, and Lisa S. Schottenfeld find a broad range of PHA policies on screening out households with criminal histories and also some discretionary application of those policies within the PHA (Curtis, Garlington, and Schottenfeld, 2013). In a study for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development of how PHAs attempt to serve people who experience homelessness, Dunton et al. (forthcoming) find that PHAs are most willing to alter their policies on screening out households with criminal backgrounds when they are working in a partnership with service organizations that will take responsibility for solving any problems that might occur in the family’s or individual’s use of the housing.

Jocelyn Fontaine’s article shows that housing with services for reentering prisoners can be effective in reducing recidivism (Fontaine, 2013). The article, unfortunately, does not go very far in

describing the services and differentiating the service models between those applied when the housing is in a single property and those applied when the program's clients are scattered. Therefore, the article does not contribute much to the lively debate about the pros and cons of project basing versus complete integration of vulnerable populations into mainstream community housing.

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Author

Jill Khadduri is a principal associate and senior fellow at Abt Associates Inc.

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