

Rooms for Improvement

A Qualitative Meta-analysis of the Housing Choice Voucher Program

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Abstract:

This article synthesizes housing subsidy voucher studies to explain why, when in theory, vouchers enable users to move out of poor neighborhoods, in practice, they often do not. This qualitative meta-analysis presents an examination of the formative assumptions of the program and their relationship to empirical findings.

Two themes emerged from this synthesis: market barriers and product problems. Qualitative data from a variety of studies and contexts portray recipients struggling to use vouchers in the private rental market due to the inaccessibility of public transportation and the presence of discrimination. Additionally product problems constrained freedom of choice about where to move and when to make a housing transition. These constraints manifest as compromised housing quality and low voucher utilization. This synthetic view cannot account for all outcomes or exceptional cases, but where the program intersects with more general phenomena, the results lead to seemingly consistent and predictable results.

Introduction

The housing voucher program is one of the primary policies designed to fulfill a need for affordable housing among low-income households throughout the United States. The stated policy objectives of the program are to make housing more affordable, thereby enabling very low-income families to improve their housing quality, relocate into better neighborhoods, and enhance their labor market outcomes (Carlson et al., 2012). The program is believed to directly impact participants as well as social and economic externalities, such as affecting the prices of nearby homes (Varady, 2013).

Studies have shown that the program has succeeded in helping participants improve their quality of housing but has failed to enable most families to move to lower poverty neighborhoods or improve their labor market outcomes. Moreover, while demand is high for these programs, most often evidenced by long waiting lists, a significant share of voucher recipients do not use the voucher once a voucher is made available to them. These mixed and sometimes unexpected outcomes suggest a need to revise the theoretical approaches to understanding how voucher use interacts with measured outcomes and an opportunity to recalibrate programmatic expectations.

Dozens of research studies from a variety of disciplines have delved into housing voucher programs, many generating qualitative data on individual housing choice vouchers. This article draws upon the findings from studies that have highlighted “take-up patterns” — that is, who uses vouchers and where the recipients move — especially in terms of income and racial composition of the neighborhood. Most researchers base their empirical studies of take-up patterns on assumptions informed by theory rather than empirics. Adding extensive empirical findings enables a critical review of the theoretical foundations.

This synthesis of the findings from a large body of qualitative studies on housing choice voucher programs across the United States explores an assumption undergirding much of the research, specifically, that such programs give voucher users the choice to participate in the private markets. Using qualitative data, it asks the following research question: How do descriptions of housing voucher applicants’ experiences help further explain the pattern of take-up rates and location outcomes described in the quantitative literature? The remainder of this article provides background on the program and its conceptual framework, introduces the qualitative method employed, and reviews the findings in detail. The findings from across individual case-based qualitative studies show that participants encounter both structural and programmatic barriers that constrain their choices

about where to relocate and when to make a residential move. The paper concludes with novel hypothesis, that the time of year that the voucher is distributed affects the take up rate and the move quality and some policy and research recommendations.

Background

The Housing Choice Voucher Program (formerly known as “Section 8”) began in 1974 and quickly grew to become one of the dominant sources of subsidized housing in the United States (Galvez 2010a). Operated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and administered by over 3,000 local public housing authorities (PHAs), the HCV Program is now the federal government’s largest housing assistance program, providing rental subsidies to over 2 million households across the country (Sard and Coven, 2006)

The HCV Program is structured to enable households to access housing in the private market. Participants, usually drawn from a waiting list, identify private market housing that meets the program’s quality and affordability standards. The program provides a monthly subsidy to cover the difference between the cost of the housing and what the participant can afford to pay, up to a locally defined “fair market rent” payment standard. HUD’s Fair Market Rent is defined as the 40th percentile rent, that is, the dollar amount below which 40 percent of the standard-quality rental housing units are rented in an area. Participants typically pay approximately 30 percent of their income for rent and utilities, with the program paying for the balance (Green, 2011).

While not the program’s original purpose (see Apgar, 1990), the HCV Program is often portrayed as a response to the concentrated poverty that has accompanied place-based, low-income public housing projects (e.g., Galvez, 2010a). Initially vouchers were framed as a means to enable “very low-income families, the elderly, and the disabled to afford decent, safe, and sanitary housing in the private market” (HUD, 2014). In recent years, an additional motivation undergirding the voucher program is to “deconcentrate the poor” by making it possible for voucher recipients to leave public housing projects and move to better neighborhoods (HUD, 2000).

According to an influential group of researchers and policy makers, housing and neighborhood quality are central components of social inequality, which undermine child and family well-being. Most often poor families live in high-poverty, low-income neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (Massey, 1996). These neighborhoods are believed to negatively affect individual and family well-being (Ludwig et al., 2012) and life outcomes (Wilson, 1996; Sampson, 2012). Although the prospect

that housing choice vouchers might enable recipient households to leave high-poverty neighborhoods has piqued the interest of researchers, housing voucher administrators have exhibited varied levels of commitment to this mission shift (Popkin, 2000; Katz & Turner, 2001).

Despite viewing the HCV Program as a tool to avoid negative externalities associated with a concentration of subsidized units— typified by bricks-and-mortar public housing units—certain researchers have identified negative externalities that appear to be associated with concentrated voucher households. Galster et al. (1999) found that property values are more likely to be adversely affected when voucher users are clustered spatially and located in disadvantaged and declining neighborhoods. This added further momentum to the deconcentration goal, even though deconcentration has not been causally linked to economic outcomes.

Housing subsidies are not an entitlement and not all households that qualify receive housing subsidies. While food and health-care assistance is available to all people on a means-tested basis, only about one in four eligible households receives federal rental assistance of any type (Sard & Avez-Sanchez, 2011; Leopold, 2012). As a consequence, most housing authorities maintain waiting lists for housing subsidies. Nationally, the average wait time is slightly longer than two years (Leopold, 2012).

HCV take-up patterns

Overall, the HCV Program has been marked both by genuine successes and significant shortcomings with regard to programmatic expectations for individual outcomes. Studies have consistently shown that the program has helped improve the quality of housing for participants and has resulted in some measurable improvements in well-being (Ludwig et al., 2012). However, two major shortcomings have emerged with respect to take-up patterns in the number of approved HCV recipients who actually use their vouchers and the locales where they eventually locate using the vouchers. HCV program participants usually do not relocate to areas of lower poverty. Rather than accessing qualifying housing units in lower poverty neighborhoods, voucher households tend to cluster in higher poverty, racially concentrated neighborhoods. In addition, many individuals who have been approved for housing assistance simply do not use the housing vouchers issued to them.

Many non-experimental and quantitative studies on voucher holders' location outcomes have enabled researchers to describe locational patterns but have left them less able to explain how or why participants locate where they do. Using non-experimental approaches, researchers have found that

voucher users are no more likely to enter safer or lower-poverty communities than low-income renters lacking housing assistance (McClure, 2008, 2011, 2013; Pendall, 2000; Galvez, 2010a; Devine et al., 2003; Owens, 2012; Lens, 2013). Many HCV households remain concentrated in hot spots (Varady et al., 2010). Researchers report that racial differences among voucher holders are “especially striking” (DeLuca et al., 2013). Black and Hispanic families are significantly less likely than whites to be living in low-poverty neighborhoods (McClure 2008; Varady & Walker 2000; Basoloa & Nguyen 2005 Galvez, 2010a; Clark, 2008).

Due to concerns of selection bias that plausibly may be interfering with reliable results from the descriptive studies, some researchers have attempted an experimental approach. Most of this type of research comes from three experimental studies: Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing (MTO) demonstration, the Welfare to Work (WTW) experiment, both funded by HUD and the Chicago Housing Authority relocation plan. This relatively limited body of experimental and quasi-experimental research has examined the relationship between voucher receipt and neighborhood quality. With few exceptions, moving through these programs did not result in families relocating to areas with much lower concentrations of African-Americans (DeLuca, 2010). Often the census tract poverty rate for those who relocated was still high and, although neighborhood differences were statistically significant, they were quite small in magnitude (Carlson et al., 2012).

Research further suggests that locational outcomes are not driven by a short supply of affordable units in lower-poverty neighborhoods (DeLuca et al., 2013). Many studies have established that, in metropolitan areas where vouchers are offered, a supply of accessible units exists in safer neighborhoods with higher quality schools. DeLuca et al. 2013, Devine et al., 2003, Turner (1998) Despite the availability of available units in most census tracts, voucher holders are unevenly distributed among these tracts, and minority voucher holders are generally underrepresented in suburban communities even after taking into account the supply of affordable housing (Galvez, 2010a; Devine et al., 2003; McClure, 2008).

Moreover, research consistently shows that only a “slim majority” of households approved for vouchers actually take advantage of them to relocate (Snell & Duncan, 2006.) For example, Finkel and Buron (2001) estimated that in the year 2000 only 69 percent of the families offered vouchers subsequently moved and made use of their voucher. Since the demand for vouchers far exceeds their supply, the fact that one-third of them are returned unused is puzzling. Similarly, in the experimental paradigms, not all households assigned vouchers made use of them. In the MTO demonstration, the

“lease up” rate for those offered a standard housing voucher was only 63 percent (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011). Similar to findings from other studies, Jacob reported that “relatively few” families took a [housing] voucher” (in this case, they opted to move to another public housing development). About two-thirds of those offered a voucher (67 percent) in the WTW program leased housing with a voucher (Wood et al., 2008).

 In general, then, both the descriptive and experimental studies show low mobility and low uptake. Even experiments that actively recruited participants reported significant difficulty motivating voucher recipients to relocate. As Pashup et al. (2005) have noted: “... it may seem surprising that not all families that can move through these programs choose to do so.” Understanding why families approved for the voucher program actually relocate and where they decide to live requires going “beyond housing supply to consider the dynamics of residential mobility and the institutional context of housing policy itself” (DeLuca et al., 2013). With a backdrop of long HCV waiting lists presumably reflecting the documented undersupply of affordable housing, policymakers seek to better understand why wait-listed voucher applicants are so reluctant to take advantage of the broader housing options offered by the HCV Program.

Conceptual framework and analytical approach

In an effort to understand take-up patterns among voucher holders, this article synthesizes the findings from a wide range of qualitative studies on the HCV Program. Researchers generally accept two primary roles for qualitative research: qualitative studies can be deployed to help explain the results of prior quantitative work, and qualitative studies play a central role in the process of developing hypotheses (Small & Feldman, 2012). Qualitative data can help researchers and policy makers understand what was going on inside the “black box” of the voucher program and to generate new hypotheses (Katz 2005)

Results from this meta-analysis will help to explain the observed take-up patterns and suggest a need to reexamine the assumption undergirding much of the pertinent research and programmatic expectation, specifically, that the HCV Program gives voucher users the choice to participate in the private housing market. This meta-analysis suggests that choice for participants may be constrained in two distinct ways, one structural and the other programmatic. A voucher program may allow users access to the general housing market but, in reality, structural market imperfections constrain choice

for HVC Program participants (DeLuca, 2013). In particular, many participants confront issues of transportation accessibility and discrimination.,

Choice of housing may also be constrained by programmatic features, such as lack of attention to market failure. It is often assumed that an HCV Program participant is viewed by landlords as equivalent to an unsubsidized renter who pays fair market rent. These factors narrow vouchers users' options for housing choice.¹

Qualitative Method

The analytical approach taken here to examine take-up patterns in the voucher program is a qualitative meta-analysis.² This approach may be particularly relevant in the voucher context because the authors of qualitative studies on vouchers emphasize the unique circumstances of their particular program. This necessarily leads to a cautious approach when attempting to draw generalizations or develop theory or policy implications. A synthetic approach attempts to identify consistent themes across studies in order to make an argument about the validity of a more generalizable hypothesis or theoretical refinement.

The method of qualitative meta-analysis is an attempt, then, through a process of translation and synthesis, to bring individual qualitative studies together with one another at a more abstract level (Jensen & Allen, 1996.) Qualitative meta-synthesis entails comparing, translating, and analyzing the original findings “with the goal of generating new interpretations” (Thorne and Paterson, 1998).

There are some problems with this approach. The first problem is methodological: the approach attempts to meaningfully synthesize studies stemming from a variety of methodological

¹ For example, a HUD-funded study conducted in metropolitan markets nationwide used paired testing (where two individuals—one minority and the other white—posed as otherwise identical home seekers). Researchers found that African-Americans and non-Hispanic whites faced discrimination in their search for rental housing (Turner, Ross, Galster & Yinger, 2002). Moreover, studies of location outcomes for voucher holders have found pronounced disparities in location by race. Black and Hispanic households are more likely than whites to relocate into neighborhoods having higher neighborhood poverty rates, and they are less likely to live in low-poverty tracts (Devine et al., 2003; Hartung & Henig, 1997; Pendall, 2000). Although the impact of discrimination and transportation accessibility on housing markets is generally acknowledged, the presence of such market imperfections is not always included in theoretical framing for the voucher program. In theory, discrimination is likely to impact housing outcomes in several ways. Clearly, discriminatory behavior by landlords based on race or housing voucher status may directly reduce housing and neighborhood options. In addition, preconceived assumptions exist among voucher holders that certain neighborhoods, landlords, or types of housing will be unwelcoming (Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000).

² Generally speaking, a qualitative meta-synthesis is a type of qualitative study that uses as data the findings from other qualitative studies linked by the same or a related topic. The data for a meta-synthesis is derived from individual qualitative studies which are selected on the basis of their relevance to a specific research question. The utility of such an approach is to integrate across individual case-based qualitative studies to identify broader common patterns.

approaches to the qualitative data. A second but related problem is that a fundamental aspect of the qualitative study is its singularity of context and the consequent exploration of how participants interpret their experiences. Therefore, the concept of bringing a number of qualitative studies to higher levels of abstraction and theory risks violating one of the essential aspects of qualitative inquiry (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Sandelowski et al., 1997). A meta-synthesis attempts to reinterpret other researchers' interpretations. Ultimately, it is the metasynthesist's task to acknowledge these limitations and develop an analysis that is logical and yields compelling and testable theories.

Following Paterson et al. (2001), the method of meta-analysis for this study comprised four distinct processes. The first step defined the purpose and research question. The purpose was to synthesize the qualitative studies that deal with the use of housing vouchers to form a more general understanding of the program mechanics and to strengthen the theoretical underpinnings of such a program. The research question was "How do descriptions of housing voucher applicants' experiences help further explain the pattern of take-up rates and location outcomes described in the quantitative literature?" The method was both inductive and deductive, as it articulated existing assumptions and examined them against the body of qualitative evidence, thus allowing for the revision and refinement of existing assumptions and theories.

The second step was a database search for relevant literature. The search began by using Google Scholar to identify keywords. A search was conducted for articles pertaining to housing vouchers and other related terms (e.g., HCV, Section 8). Following this, search terms were used to identify articles that reported studies using a qualitative research design (including randomized control trials, cohort studies, and mixed methods studies that included both surveys and focus groups). The inclusion criteria were the following: (1) published articles/reports and dissertations/reports/book chapters, (2) investigations of location choice deliberations,³ and (3) articles about housing vouchers in the United States. The search was complemented with forward and backward citation tracking and contact with researchers and practitioners in the housing voucher field. After applying these criteria 19 articles remained (see Figure 1). The articles were entered into software for coding and analyzing unstructured data.

³ Many qualitative inquiries were excluded from this analysis, as they did not focus on location choice

Figure 1. List of studies used in this meta-analysis

Authors and Publication date	Title	Data source	Locations	Number of Participants	Selection mode
Boyd et al., 2006	The durability of the Gautreaux Two Residential Mobility Program: A qualitative analysis of who stays and who moves from low-poverty neighborhoods	Gautreaux Two Housing Mobility Study	Chicago, IL	91	Program recruits
Briggs & Turner 1996	Lessons for Practice	Moving to Opportunity	Chicago, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Boston	Not listed	Experimental
Brooks et al., 2005	Resident perception of housing, neighborhood, and economic conditions after relocation from public housing undergoing HOPE VI redevelopment	Case study	Atlanta, GA	93	Involuntary relocation
DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2010	Does moving to better neighborhoods lead to better schooling opportunities? Parental school choice in an experimental housing voucher program	Moving to Opportunity	Baltimore, MD	249	Experimental program
DeLuca et al., 2013	Segregating shelter: how housing policies shape the residential locations of low-income minority families	Case study	Mobile, AL	100	Special program
Duncan, 2008	New lessons from the Gautreaux and Moving to Opportunity residential mobility programs	Gautreaux and Moving to Opportunity	Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York	Not given	Special program
Freiman et al., 2013	Housing assistance and supportive services in Memphis: Final brief	Case Study	Memphis, TN	26	Involuntary relocation
Galvez, 2010	Getting past 'no': Housing choice voucher holders' experiences with discrimination and search costs	Case study	Seattle, WA	31	Involuntary relocation
Greenlee, 2011	A different lens: administrative perspectives on portability in Illinois' Housing Choice Voucher Program	Case studies	Cook County, IL	18	Standard HCVP

Katz, Kling and Lieberman, 2000	Moving to Opportunity in Boston: early results of a randomized mobility experiment	Moving to Opportunity site	Boston, MA		Experimental Program
Kleit & Manzo, 2006	To move or not to move: Relationships to place and relocation choices in HOPE VI	Case studies	Seattle, WA	200	Involuntary relocation
Marr, 2005	Mitigating apprehension about Section 8 vouchers: The positive role of housing specialists in search and placement	Case Studies	Los Angeles, CA	5 (ethnographic, repeated interviews)	Standard HCVP
Pashup et al., 2005	Participation in a residential mobility Program from the client's perspective: findings from Gautreaux Two	Gautreaux Two Housing Mobility Study	Chicago, IL	71	Program recruits
Popkin 2000	Searching for Section 8	Plan for Transformation	Chicago	141	Involuntary relocation
Scott 2013	A case study of Anacostia: the role of housing vouchers on the local housing market	Case study	Washington DC	84	Standard HCVP program
Teater 2011	A qualitative evaluation of the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program: The recipients' perspectives	Case study	Midwestern City	14	Standard HCVP program
Varady & Walker 2000	Vouchering out distressed subsidized developments: Does moving lead to improvements in housing and neighborhood conditions?	Case studies	San Francisco, Kansas City, Newport News, Baltimore	201	Involuntary relocation
Varady et al., 2013	How housing professionals perceive effects of the Housing Choice Voucher Program on suburban communities	Case study	Cincinnati	17	Standard HCVP program
Varady, Walker & Wang 2001	Voucher Recipient Achievement of Improved Housing Conditions in the US: Do Moving Distance and Relocation Services Matter?	Case studies	San Francisco, Kansas City, Newport News, Baltimore	201	Involuntary relocation
Woods, Turnham & Mills, 2008	Housing affordability and family well-being: results from the housing voucher evaluation	Welfare to Work	Atlanta; Augusta, GA; Fresno, CA; Houston; Los Angeles; and Spokane, WA	141	Experimental

In the third step, which was the meta-data-analysis step, the findings were grouped by issue.

The data analysis method was identified, which was to use the a-priori theme of location choice

deliberations in order to develop sub-themes in a grounded fashion. The studies were read three times: First for an initial understanding, second for an initial coding and development of grounded themes, and third for a final grounded coding. The grounded analysis led to 32 distinct sub-themes relating to the a-priori themes. The third reading of the studies coded for these grounded themes.

The fourth and final step, the meta-synthesis step, involved reviewing these themes, their relative frequency in the body of qualitative data and their relationship to the theoretical framework. Two themes dominated: market problems and product problems. These served as support for the new theoretical framework and the supporting main concepts. The remaining themes were assessed for their applicability to the dominant concepts and either categorized as sub-themes or excluded from final analysis. The analysis below presents these themes and their applicability to explanations regarding location outcomes and program utilization.

The studies highlighted below, similar to the descriptive and experimental studies described above, vary in terms of the circumstance through which the participants obtained their vouchers and constraints placed upon them contingent upon receiving them. Some participants came voluntarily, having signed up for a mobility program (i.e., MTO studies and Pashup et al., 2005); others were subjected to forced relocation (i.e., Popkin, 2000; Varady, 2000). Still others were randomly assigned to an experiment (Wood et al., 2008). The effort here is to attempt an analysis which identifies themes that apply across circumstances and thus may illuminate programmatic outcomes and policy implications that apply more generally.

Findings : Addressing the free market assumption

The qualitative findings are presented below in two sections, one which focuses on how structural problems endemic to the housing market also apply to the housing voucher rental process. The other focuses on specific programmatic problems that do not allow voucher holders to participate fully in the private rental market. Taken together, the qualitative data does not support the fundamental assumption that the program allows recipients to “exercise free and full location choices” (Katz & Turner, 2001). Vouchers are often framed as “providing poor households with a subsidy enabling them to pay fair market rents.” Many policymakers and researchers assume that the program gives participants options: “... a choice on housing location, voucher recipients can decide what best suits the needs of their household; opting to sacrifice space for a better school district, for a house instead of an apartment, or for a shorter commute to their place of employment. There are

many factors that go into deciding on a location to live and the voucher approach is seen as providing that freedom of choice for families” (Matthews, 1998). Thus, the housing voucher is believed to enable low-income households to participate in the mainstream housing market, affording them choices of location similar to those facing middle-income renters. The qualitative studies provide detailed accounts of participants’ attempts to choose where to live, illustrating how “market problems limit choices” (Kleit & Manzo, 2006). Many qualitative cases show how participants, after obtaining a housing voucher, experience constrained location choice.

Market Barriers: Transportation Constraints

In general, the consequences of uneven availability of public transportation on housing accessibility are well documented, especially for those reliant on public transportation (Squires, 2002). A market barrier of this type has not always been integrated into theoretical framing for voucher programs, despite the qualitative data confirming that voucher users are also subject to similar transportation constraints. One voucher recipient in Baltimore explained her logic for choosing a central city neighborhood: “And you move to a location where the nearest grocery store is 2 miles away. How are you going to go there and get back with a full bag of groceries?” (Varady & Walker, 2000). An MTO participant, also from Baltimore, explained her experience living in a neighborhood that was not transportation-accessible: “I had to get back into the city where more buses run on a frequent basis than in the county. ... If you miss the [bus], if you missed it, go back home, sit down at the table, whatever. ‘Cause the next bus comes an hour and a half to two hours later. So that was ridiculous and there was a lot of stress” (Duncan, 2008). In another study, a voucher recipient from Chicago explained her location choice: “I prefer to stay in the city. For one, if my child gets sick and me, I don’t have a car. Where I live, I could walk to the county [hospital]. If the buses [in the suburbs] stopped running at 6. ... They [the suburbs] might be pretty, but the city is close to everything” (Popkin & Cunningham, 2000).

Some participants view transportation accessibility as a key feature in location choice, as a recipient from Buffalo, NY, explained: “It’s got to have transportation ... the buses don’t run there, so it’s a bad situation” (Popkin et al, 2003). Similarly, participants in Illinois explained how transportation accessibility is a concern beyond job accessibility: “... but if you don’t have the job and the transportation, or a good running car to get there, you’re not going to make it ... even to get to the store or the doctor” (Greenlee, 2011). Many voucher holders reported their need for housing with

access to public transportation outranked the desire to live in lower-poverty communities. The qualitative data revealed the biggest concern of voucher recipients. Although housing units in low-poverty neighborhoods may have been affordable when subsidized by a voucher, they were often not readily accessible to work, school, extended family members, or the institutions required to meet their daily needs.

Notably, although some researchers anticipated that participants would list access to networks of social support as important considerations when choosing a place to move,⁴ this theme did not appear prominently across studies in the qualitative analysis of location choice. Rather, access to family and friends appeared most prominently as a subtheme within the transportation accessibility theme. Participant did express concern with how changing locations might affect their social relationships, but less in terms of proximity to family and friends than in terms of accessibility to them. Possibly because transportation accessibility was an important feature of location choice, moves did not necessarily negatively affect social relationships. As Briggs found in MTO, “It is not yet clear to what degree MTO movers lost social support, or experienced a shift in informal support, based on relocation distance or other access factors.” Thus, in considering a new location, participants seemed interested in assuring accessibility to dense public transportation networks to reach friends and family but also schools, jobs and other locations.

Market barriers: Discrimination

Racial and ethnic discrimination in the urban housing markets generally is a barrier for housing choice voucher recipients. This type of discrimination discourages members of low-income minorities from moving to predominantly white or suburban neighborhoods, even if affordable housing is located there (Yinger, 1998). The qualitative data related to voucher recipients’ searches for housing show at least two kinds of discrimination: racial discrimination and source of income discrimination. Many qualitative accounts found evidence of source of income discrimination, specifically the reliance on a government-subsidized housing voucher. Some hypothesize that source of income discrimination “may artificially limit the housing and neighborhood options available to voucher holders” (Galvez, 2010a). Reluctance to accept vouchers appears to be due to both negative perceptions of the housing authorities that administer voucher programs and of voucher holders themselves (Greenlee, 2011;

⁴ Safety is by far the most important consideration for movers.

Scott, 2013).

Many studies relate participants' accounts of being subject to source of income discrimination. One participant from Chicago recounted an experience with a potential landlord: "She was like, she don't rent to Section 8 [i.e., voucher holders] at all. And I said, 'Just because a person has a ... voucher, that doesn't make the person mean or unorganized ... or an unclean person!'" (Pashup et al., 2005). Another participant in Kansas City found that "The landlords I spoke with were very nice and very positive, but they didn't want Section 8 vouchers" (Varady & Walker, 2000). According to a WTW participant: "They [i.e., the owners] had the stigma about everybody that's on Section 8 are nasty, the children tear up the house" (Wood, Turnham & Mills, 2008). In a study of a "mid-western city," Teater (2011) reported that one recipient described: "There is stigma attached that says these are all people that are gonna tear up your unit, that are going to not work, they're gonna have high crime, they're not doing anything but having babies and things like that." The landlords' reluctance to rent on the basis of the tenants' group characteristic—in this case, being categorized as a member of the voucher group, is considered "source of income discrimination."

Some participants in the qualitative studies described perceived racial discrimination. Popkin (2000) recounted one Chicago resident's experiences with a prospective landlord. At first, the participant explained that the landlord initially encouraged the applicant: "Oh, yes, you come over here, I want to meet you." However, the applicant explained that "I got there, I guess she see my black face and changed her mind! She was polite ... but I didn't get the apartment ... she talked to me on the porch. But I knew what time it was, I'm not stuck on stupid" (Popkin & Cunningham, 2000). Studies provide less documentation of direct racial discrimination against voucher holders who are members of minority groups. Some authors surmise that this is because prospective tenants do not conduct their housing searches in nonminority neighborhoods.⁵

Others suggest that discrimination against voucher holders may merely mask racial discrimination. Voucher program participants in many regions are disproportionately nonwhite compared with the overall population. On the basis of a study in Seattle, Galvez concluded that: "... landlords in these MSAs may view voucher assistance as a proxy for race, and avoid all voucher

⁵ Some studies report findings that participants are often hesitant to relocate to nonwhite neighborhoods for fear of experiencing discrimination. According to one housing counselor in Illinois who had helped a black family move into a neighborhood where they were a minority: "They were fearful of coming out. I remember one lady calling me saying 'Hey, my kids are gonna be there and I'm scared. They were the only black family on the block, so they were fearful'" (Greenlee, 2011). This led the family to ask to be relocated to a neighborhood with more black residents.

holders in an effort to avoid nonwhite tenants (Galvez,2010a).” Clearly, discrimination may directly reduce housing and neighborhood options if landlords in low-poverty neighborhoods refuse to accept voucher tenants.

Several studies demonstrate that source of income protections — laws prohibiting housing discrimination based on the source of income being a voucher — do improve outcomes for voucher holders (Finkel & Buron, 2001; Freeman, 2012). However, Galvez found that despite local source of income protections in the City of Seattle, “Half of the focus group and interview participants experienced or perceived landlord discrimination because of their voucher status” (Galvez, 2010b). This suggests that the ordinance alone may not be enough to eliminate discrimination (McClure, 2005).

Discrimination against voucher recipients on the basis of their racial or ethnic identity or their source of income is a factor that contributes to lower HCV utilization rates, thereby adversely affected the success of these housing programs. It is likely that discrimination also contributes to voucher recipients choosing to reside in more disadvantaged neighborhoods (Freeman, 2012). Discrimination results in voucher recipients living in poor and racially segregated neighborhoods. Nevertheless, certain landlords — seeing some sort of benefit to participating in the HCV Program — do not engage in discriminatory practices and lease housing to voucher holders.

Product problems: Partial subsidy

As noted above, in theory, the voucher should enable the user to negotiate for a lease in the private market. However, the granting of a housing voucher does not address all the conventional ways in which the market evaluates the renters themselves. In the private market for rental housing, a prospective tenant inspects a unit, assesses whether the price is competitive and whether the unit fits his or her needs, and, if deemed suitable, attempts to enter into a contract with the landlord. In the contract, the renter agrees to pay a monthly sum in exchange for the right to use the unit for a fixed period of time, usually a year. This agreement puts the landlord’s capital at some risk. The most obvious risk is that the renter will damage the unit or depreciate the landlords’ capital beyond what the landlord anticipated when setting the monthly rent. The second risk is that the tenant will terminate the lease before the end of the contract, leaving the landlord without the anticipated revenue stream. For these reasons, the landlord often asks to review the tenants’ credit history, which

is seen as a proxy for timely rental payment, and asks that the tenant share in the risk by putting down a deposit, which the tenant agrees to forgo in the event of serious damage or early departure.

Ideally stated, “a voucher user can select from a variety of apartments on the private market — offering many more choices within the same budget constraint” (Kling et al, 2004). Yet studies have demonstrated that possessing a voucher does not allow users to negotiate competitively in that market. Qualitative details illustrate that. housing voucher does not repair a problematic credit history nor does it compensate landlords for the costs of secondary inspections required by the HCV Program. In addition, a voucher is only a guarantee of partial — not full — payment of the monthly rent, and the voucher does not provide participants with a rental deposit.

To begin with, voucher holders who attempt to use their vouchers in the private market often are subjected to credit inspections. A landlord usually expects a prospective tenant to bring documentation of assets including credit score (Marr, 2005). In a study of a voucher program in Chicago, Pashup et al., (2005) commented: “Credit problems were common, and participants did not know how to correct them or present them in a more positive light.” Because only a portion of the monthly rent is subsidized, the voucher-holding tenant must pay 30 percent of his or her income to the landlord, landlords may be concerned that the portion of rent to be paid by the renter is still too much risk for them to assume, according to the landlord’s standard criteria. (It is impossible to know whether assessment of credit risk masks underlying racial discrimination.).

As mentioned previously, the housing units of landlords who lease to voucher holders are subjected to a secondary inspection to determine if the unit meets HCV Program guidelines for unit quality and safety. The landlord bears a cost for this process in terms of lost time on the market and expenditures if improvements are required. The program does not compensate landlords for lost income associated with waiting for the housing unit to be inspected and certified. Many studies have documented the additional time spent waiting for inspectors and verification. Varady et al. (2013) recounted one landlord’s perspective: “The fact that their tenants and their program cost us a lot of money — they don’t care.” According to Pashup et al. (2005), in Chicago “respondents reported that landlords complained about how extraordinarily long it took for a unit to be inspected and approved, as well as delays in receiving security deposits and rent payments.” Other accounts, such as that by Marr (2005) also documented the frustration of landlords related to the costs associated with delays while waiting for certification.

Moreover, voucher holders usually lack the capital requirement of the deposit (typically two months at the market rate rent). Security deposits are explicitly excluded as a matter of policy. The HUD *Housing Choice Voucher Guidebook* states: “The cost of the security deposit is not covered under the Housing Choice Voucher Program” (HUD, 2014). HUD instructs PHAs to conduct a “briefing” after a family is determined to be eligible for assistance. The PHA is “expected to explain at the briefing that the family is responsible for any security deposit requested by the owner.” Galvez (2010b) reported that for participants “... deposit fees, however, were by far the most pressing concern, requiring voucher holders to find landlords willing to accept deposit payments over time, or reduced payments.”

Qualitative accounts also show how both the tenant and the landlord compromise to compensate for these limitations. It appears that fees are often waived or are significantly reduced for voucher holders. Compromises appear to be reduced choices or the tenant accepting below market-rate quality units at market rate rents. In Washington, DC, participants reported reduced choice due to lack of deposit: “Not many options because apartments check credit” (Scott, 2013). “Participants frequently discussed the need to find ‘good’ landlords who would not only accept vouchers but also ‘work with you’ to negotiate an affordable lease agreement (Galvez, 2010b). For some study participants with poor credit or who could not pay a deposit in full, “... finding a landlord that would make concessions was among their primary considerations. For others, it also meant avoiding or weeding out landlords likely to deny voucher holders or tenants with bad credit.” Several voucher holders who knew they had credit problems targeted landlords they felt were unlikely to do credit searches.”

Often, the cases demonstrate how the programs must appeal to a landlord’s sense of mission or charity, which is not a sound economic basis for a program. Scott has documented that the program “often involves soliciting landlords’ understanding and compassion.” He cited the following reason for landlords to participate in the program: “To get rent paid on time and to provide a service for those in need” (Scott, 2013). HUD encourages PHAs to identify local community resources “for which families can apply to complement their housing assistance. This might include any services of financial assistance for security deposits” (HUD, 2014). These studies documenting that housing counselors stress the charitable aspects of the program suggest that the voucher is not functioning as a market-based product. As a result, voucher holders may rely on a “Section 8 submarket” consisting

mainly of landlords who already rent to voucher households or have done so in the past (Briggs & Turner, 2006; Kennedy & Finkel, 1994).⁶

The details provided by program participants indicate that landlords' hesitancy to work with the program is not exclusively discrimination in the sense of "the practice of unfairly treating a person or group of people differently from other people or groups of people." While landlords are acting unfairly when they employ a negative stereotype of all voucher holders. A voucher does not ensure that the holder is able to meet all the criteria for renting in the private market. Therefore, discrimination may not be at play if landlords are turning away potential tenants because the tenants cannot meet the terms of the contract or the landlord does not like the program design or demands.

Regardless of the source of discrimination, many qualitative studies have detailed the consequences of these barriers for voucher holders. Respondents in a Seattle study concisely stated the locational outcomes associated with poor credit: "The credit checks determine where you live" (Galvez, 2010b). According to Popkin and Cunningham (1999), the lack of funds to cover move-in costs serves as a formidable barrier to many recipients. Some users believe this is the greatest impediment that prevents them from relocating. As one participant stated: "That's why I didn't move, I stayed where I was because I couldn't come up with the security" (Popkin & Cunningham, 1999). As HUD acknowledges: "... not having budgeted for [the security deposit], the family fails to lease under the Housing Choice Voucher Program." Thus, a household lacking the money for a security deposit may subsequently be unable to participate in the voucher program.

More to the point, however, these compromises affected housing quality. Researchers noted that "successful searchers reported that they felt they had settled for a less-than-ideal unit." In Chicago, researchers reported that participants planned to move as soon as their leases expired because they were living in dangerous neighborhoods. Galvez also noted that in Seattle, "Participants universally discussed wanting to live in "good" neighborhoods. Nevertheless, several participants

⁶ Because rents vary in regional submarkets, the program's Fair Market Rent is less competitive in higher cost areas. This variation in rental demand and price will represent a sort of bonus in areas with poor quality housing or less desirable neighborhoods. Such a "bonus" may provide landlords with incentive to make the other financial accommodations in terms of the deposit or credit requirements. . These factors may be exacerbated in low-poverty neighborhoods or tight housing markets, where landlords have many alternatives to voucher tenants. Research suggests that sometimes a sense of charity but often a lack of alternatives is why landlords' tolerate programmatic delays (Greenlee,2011; Marr, 2005; Varady 2013).

appeared to compromise on preferences because they needed financial concessions from landlords.”(Galvez, 2010b). Thus, even without discrimination from the landlords’ side and self-selection on the household side — the product might drive users to lower than average quality units in lower than average quality locations.

. These constraints may also be affecting the take-up rate. Some rental applicants did not use their vouchers because they reported that they were unwilling to live in bad units or neighborhoods (Popkin, 2000).

Other studies have demonstrated that a guaranteed partial rent associated with vouchers actually motivates certain landlords, especially in weak rental markets. Such landlords may readily be incentivized to make financial concessions in terms of the security deposit or credit requirements. For example, participants in Seattle reported that: “Seattle’s relatively weak housing market seemed easier to navigate and had more housing available compared to past moves, and ‘move in specials’ with fixed application and deposit fees were common” (Galvez, 2010b). In neighborhoods where demand for rental housing is strong and vacancy rates are low, landlords “may have little incentive to accept Section 8 tenants” (Katz & Turner, 2001).

Qualitative data suggest a lack of clarity regarding reputed prejudicial discrimination engaged in by the landlords. What may exist is discrimination in the sense of differentiating between two things that are distinctly different. A close reading of the qualitative data also belies the market assumption that a voucher holder is equivalent to a renter who can pay Fair Market Rent. Rather, the qualitative data demonstrate how voucher holders, administrators, and landlords implicitly understand that the housing choice voucher is a less competitive alternative to, not a direct substitute for, private market rent.

Product Problems: Timing

Qualitative studies also call into question the freedom of choice assumption as it relates to a voucher user’s ability to determine when to move. Qualitative data highlights the role that time constraints play in both take-up patterns and housing choice. Private market renters have much more discretion than voucher users about when they relocate. Obviously, residents caught up in cases of public housing demolition or “forced relocations” have little or no control over the timing of relocation. But more broadly speaking, HCV Program participants have little choice regarding the time frame of when to use a voucher. As Carlson et al. (2012) note, “Obtaining and using a Section 8

voucher is a multistep process that routinely spans multiple years.” These time constraints appear in two forms. The first is the unpredictable timing of voucher availability. Voucher applicants most typically place themselves on a waiting list and the elapsed time from initial application to receipt of a voucher ranges widely—from 2 to 10 years for some housing authorities. According to national estimates, 20 percent of PHAs have waiting times of three or more years (Carlson et al., 2012; Finkel & Buron, 2001). Cases in the qualitative data confirmed this pattern. In Chicago, about 30,000 families were wait-listed for Chicago housing assistance, and the waiting times were seven to eight years for voucher assistance. In Los Angeles, “the estimated waiting period for the 150,000 eligible households seeking regular Section 8 vouchers in the city was eight years” (Marr, 2005). For example, DeLuca highlighted one participant: “Keisha, a mother of two, described the long lines and uncertainty of the process: ‘Fill out an application, and they’ll call you once you reach the top of the list. It may be one year, it may be four years.’” This level of indeterminacy does not allow for voucher holders to plan for moves or chose a time frame best suited to their life circumstances.

Qualitative accounts discussed some of the consequences of lag times between filling out an application and issuance of a voucher. An obvious one is attrition: a voucher applicant ready to relocate at the time of application may experience changes in life circumstances during the intervening time. In Washington, DC, Scott (2013) found that there are a “significant amount of people who have moved from the area or whose situation has improved by the time their name gets to the top of the list.”⁷ DeLuca has detailed how participants in Baltimore discussed having spent years⁸ “on the wait list which made “for a seemingly random initiation of the housing search for families.” Pashup et al. (2005) have reported that, for a select group of participants who did not move using a voucher in Chicago, “their only obstacle to program uptake was lack of time due to employment and educational commitments.” Certain positive changes in life circumstances meant they were no longer motivated to use a voucher. As a result, it has been difficult to assess the fraction of vouchers issued to applicants that remain unused due to such changes in circumstances. After being notified by housing authorities, they do not reply. To date, most studies have produced limited information about voucher holders who did not make use of a voucher to relocate.

⁷ Quantitative data support this idea. Analyses done in 2010 of how long people remain in the voucher program reported a median of 48 months. A majority — 57 percent — had received assistance for five years or less. This suggests that many voucher applicants may spend more time wait-listed than actually participating in the program.

Moreover, voucher applicants face another obstacle related to moving in addition to indeterminate wait-listing. Once notified that a voucher receipt is being issued, a voucher recipient has very limited time to locate housing. They usually must move in 60 to 120 days. If housing is not located within that window of opportunity, the voucher is rescinded. Qualitative studies provide extensive details about the “use it or lose it pressure” (Briggs & Turner,⁹ 2006) and its consequences. The research commonly reported that voucher recipients felt pressed for time (Smith et al., 2001; Popkin & Cunningham, 1999, 2000) and often chose lower-quality housing as a result (Wood, Turnham & Mills, 2008). Popkin reported that a voucher recipient in Chicago chose an apartment but “... it was in the middle of winter. And like I said, I ended up just having to take something that I really didn’t want.” Another Chicago respondent explained: “You would have to end up living somewhere that you don’t want to live because of the simple fact they done put a rush on you.” According to DeLuca, one resident of Baltimore explained her compromise due to both time and deposit constraints, which led her to accept a unit, despite a number of “red flags,” as she put it. “I was running out of time. So the last place that I had come to was 139 Locust Avenue. And the landlord was supposedly nice, give you an opportunity to move in, less deposit, you know. But it should have been a flag. A hundred dollar deposit? Red flag. So I took him up on it because I knew I had to get somewhere; if I didn’t I was going to lose out on my voucher all together.” DeLuca explained: “Instead of gambling with more time,” the participant felt under pressure to settle for substandard housing. Time constraints affected the resultant neighborhood quality too. Kansas City housing participants in Varady and Walker study (2000) “also stressed the time constraint placed on residents there, which meant limited assistance to move into less known neighborhoods located farther away.” In Illinois, Greenlee (2011) noted: “This acute need to quickly find an available unit suggests that some porting households may not be able to take full advantage of making more informed housing searches due to time limitations.” Woods, Turnham & Mills (2008) similarly concluded: “As a result, many made expedient housing and neighborhood decisions that later proved unsatisfactory.” Voucher holders find themselves competing in an open rental market though hampered by time restrictions, and this limits where they can live (Guhathakurta and Mushkatel, 2000). The qualitative data underscore this point: voucher program parameters constrain when participants are able to move and this constraint results in compromised quality in housing type and locale.

In fact, it is possible that some of the low utilization rate of vouchers is due to program time constraints. As Galvez has explained in her qualitative analysis of the Seattle Housing Authority voucher program: “The housing success rate hovers around 60 percent, meaning that approximately four out of 10 voucher holders fail to find housing within 120 days and lose their vouchers as a result.” (Galvez, 2010b). DeLuca has posited that some residents do not use the voucher because “years spent on the wait list make for a seemingly random initiation of the housing search for families who have no time to prepare.”

Discussion

This paper explored several key policy assumptions underlying the housing choice voucher program to determine if the body of qualitative data on housing vouchers generally validates this conventional wisdom. When circumstances across the qualitative cases suggest that assumptions may be flawed, I attempt to develop alternative interpretations that might improve the theoretical framing and program outcomes. To do so, I have analyzed voucher program participant experiences across a variety of regions, market conditions, and programmatic configurations. Several key patterns appear to be applicable across study contexts. Qualitative data support that voucher holders encounter barriers to participation in the private rental market that ultimately restrict housing choice. This analysis sheds light on the confounding socioeconomic and administrative aspects of the Housing Choice Voucher Program that impede such programs, in general, from achieving the anticipated effectiveness. By examining these assumptions, it may be possible to better explain programmatic outcomes and contribute to ways of reformulating these assumptions to improve outcomes such as voucher settlement patterns and utilization. Two themes emerged from my analysis. The first theme challenges the market assumption that a voucher provides the recipients with freedom of choice regarding where to move. Many earlier studies have reported that “market-based mechanisms such as housing vouchers do not correct for market failure” (Ross, Shlay, & Picon, 2012). My analysis of the qualitative data underscores that participants’ mobility in the housing market is constrained by two forms of market barriers: the inaccessibility of public transportation in many neighborhoods and implicit forms of discrimination—either racial/ethnic or source of income discrimination—that exert a profound, yet often unacknowledged, effect on program outcomes.

The second theme focuses on the conventional wisdom that possessing a voucher makes a prospective renter equivalent to someone who can pay fair market rent without a subsidy. Qualitative

data from a variety of contexts show that voucher recipients cannot compete with private market renters because the voucher holders often lack a security deposit and good credit standing. In addition, voucher holders are under pressure to find suitable housing within 60 to 120 days and lack discretion over optimizing the timing of a relocation relative to their familial obligations and work schedules. Freedom of choice regarding where to move and when to make the transition appear to compromise housing quality, both in terms of the housing unit itself as well as its location. This analysis also suggests that such constraints likely contribute to lower voucher utilization.

Policy Implications and future research

Many factors constrain where low-income households are able to live—regardless of whether their housing is subsidized. However, highly relevant to housing location outcomes, yet poorly understood, is the role of housing policy as it applies in the practical context. New analysis has the potential to enhance individual outcomes and reduce negative externalities.

On the one hand, market problems reflect systemic problems that may be beyond the scope of program-level adjustments. As such, participants in the program will likely benefit from policies that succeed in reducing identity discrimination and improving transportation modes to destinations that people need and want to go: school, work, shopping, friends, family, medical and recreation facilities and the like, whether that happens through improved public transportation, taking advantage of technological change that enable car sharing or some other approach.

To the degree discrimination reflects product problems rather than that prejudices, product problems could be addressed in a variety of ways. While applicants for housing subsidies are wait-listed for many months, housing agency administrators could provide credit counseling to voucher applicants to improve their apparent risk profiles for prospective landlords. To make the voucher product a more attractive option to landlords, repair assistance programs and other forms of financial assistance are ideas worth exploring. To make the product more appealing to low-income households, the Housing Choice Voucher Program could allow voucher holders to have greater control over when they move. Research suggests that moves during the summer months are more favorable both for the children who change schools and also the classrooms and schools they attend (Rumberger 2003). While the impacts of the timing of the vouchers can be tested using historical data, it could also be implemented as a pilot policy. Policymakers might experimenting with a “summer moves” program, in

which vouchers are distributed in May and moves anticipated in late July or prior to the start of the school year

While this qualitative meta-analysis focused on the theoretical reframing of certain assumptions, other factors are clearly at play in regard to the location outcomes of voucher recipients. These factors present many areas for future policy and research. Some have proposed the idea of instituting small area FMRs intended to address inequities arising from variations in rent at the submarket level. Small area FMRs would enable vouchers to be used more readily in higher rent neighborhoods, while simultaneously ensuring that landlords of poorer quality housing do not receive excess rent (Olsen, 2014).

Who actually decides to participate in a housing voucher program (i.e., participant selection bias) and the housing agency counseling that they receive are assumed to be factors in location outcomes. Many assumptions about participant selection bias suggest that participant motivation is also a factor in location outcomes, as well as a factor in whether someone who receives a housing voucher actually makes use of it (i.e., programmatic uptake). To date, understanding of participant motivation is limited, particularly how a participant's life circumstances and subsequent motivations differ at the time of applying for housing assistance and months — or years — later when a voucher is actually issued. How participant motivation changes over time could be another avenue for future qualitative research.

Finally, conforming to the qualitative approach, this analysis also suggests a new hypothesis regarding take up patterns and location outcomes: The time of year in which the voucher is distributed may affect the take up rate and the quality of the move. Because moves during the summer months are an optimal time to change schools, moves during this time may have superior outcomes in terms of both the take-up rate and the location outcomes. That is, parents offered vouchers during the summer months may utilize the vouchers more frequently and be more inclined to change neighborhoods because of the window of opportunity coincides with an ideal time to relocate school age children. This hypothesis can be tested through the analysis of historical administrative data.

Distinctions in how poor and non-poor people are treated and how they behave in the housing market are unlikely to be eliminated by any subsidy or assistance program. Qualitative research demonstrates that a voucher program does not enable participants to operate within the same constraints as private market renters. This suggests that the conventional wisdom espoused by many

researchers and policymakers may be flawed. Researchers and policymakers could adjust both the theoretical framing and programmatic structure of housing choice voucher programs in ways that reflect the reality of program participants' experiences and housing market dynamics. A housing choice voucher program can and should help to deconcentrate poverty and improve the life prospects for lower-income households. Progress toward these goals is best served by gaining a more accurate understanding of program dynamics.

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