

Commentary: Considerations for Improving the Quality of Life for Voucher Recipients

Mark A. Stallo

Dallas Police Department

The six articles included in this *Cityscape* symposium address a wide range of issues related to public housing and crime. These articles present very interesting and important issues that need to be considered when developing a public policy toward the safety of all neighborhood residents, including public housing tenants. This commentary addresses some of the insights gained from my 34 years of law enforcement experience and a great deal of study related to various types of public housing. The findings from each article lend a new perspective toward possibly improving the quality of life for public housing and voucher recipients. The authors cover issues such as criminal records, mental health, neighborhood integration, and education. They remind the reader that no quick fix exists with regard to integrating government housing populations into the various neighborhoods that have developed throughout the United States. I highlight important passages from each article to emphasize the most salient points about public housing issues related to crime, and, when relevant, I provide examples from my experience with the Dallas Police Department (DPD).

In their article, Marah A. Curtis, Sarah Garlington, and Lisa S. Schottenfeld make it clear in the following statement that change is needed and that the policies should be made clear and consistent.

Policymakers may need to consider structural changes to the federal alcohol, drug, and criminal history restrictions and limitations to PHA [*public housing authority*] discretion in favor of clear, equitable policy standards that are transparent and consistent across the housing assistance programs. (Curtis, Garlington, and Schottenfeld, 2013: 49)

Although a more liberal policy shift may help first-time offenders obtain public housing, strict rules should be put in place to monitor these individuals and protect those tenants who follow the rules and are well integrated into society. Many potential policies would affect tenant freedom, but they would necessarily increase the security of the residents. One example is a restriction in the lease on the time tenants and visitors can linger in the common areas. When these restrictions were placed in high-crime areas in Dallas, crime was reduced because the opportunity for conflicts and fights to occur late at night was less. This enforcement works well in all types of multifamily housing. Another policy that I have seen protect residents is an early criminal record check to determine if the resident has committed other crimes. Another issue that I repeatedly observed was offenders who were not on the lease living with a tenant for an extended period of time.

These individuals need to be removed from the property through criminal trespass laws. Overall, landlords are responsible for the well-being of all tenants living in the complex, and landlords working with various public housing authorities (PHAs) to implement policies can create a safe environment in which to live while giving ex-offenders an opportunity to restart their lives.

In her article, Jocelyn Fontaine demonstrates, with the Returning Home—Ohio (RHO) experiment, that programs to help individuals coming out of prison can be successful but may need to be customized for mentally ill people and drug abusers.

Finally, although the overall program was effective, this study does show that some participant characteristics were significantly related to recidivism. Specifically, the finding that those with a substance abuse (mental health) or personality disorder diagnosis had worse outcomes than those without these diagnoses may reveal something about RHO or about individuals with these characteristics. (Fontaine, 2013: 71)

Proper support for these individuals is necessary to help them to become productive citizens once again, and housing is a critical component. PHAs must be prepared to deal with these types of tenants and formulate plans to reintegrate them into the neighborhood. If these populations are ignored, citizens living in their neighborhoods will suffer the consequences—these tenants will end up somewhere and leave some community vulnerable. Throughout my career, I have seen individuals who have received counseling and support become successful in society. This approach seems to work much better than enforcement.

Christopher Hayes, Graham MacDonald, Susan Popkin, Leah Hendey, and Allison Stolte point out in their article that special services are important in helping neighborhoods absorb voucher households and in integrating them into the neighborhood to prevent crime.

These findings support the conclusions of our earlier study, further emphasize the need for greater services and supports for relocated households, and can help inform policy directed at breaking the association between these households and neighborhood crime rates. (Hayes et al., 2013: 9)

These services could range from additional security to onsite counseling. Both types of services are expensive and could reduce the number of dollars available to provide housing for those who need it. Each action will have a reaction in the budget for each PHA. One method for monitoring criminal activity in public housing is to determine who has been arrested and who has given an address in a public housing development. Many of these individuals are not on the lease, and this information can be provided for the management at the PHA to take appropriate action. This approach was used in the past between the DPD and the Dallas Housing Authority (DHA). It is quite necessary, however, to provide housing to these individuals and to introduce programs so that they do not affect other tenants.

In his article, Michael C. Lens discusses the difficulty of finding good quality housing in a safe neighborhood.

These findings suggest that the existence of tight rental markets in low-crime neighborhoods within cities makes it harder for HCVP households to access those neighborhoods.

Cities with these market characteristics can respond through landlord outreach and by increasing the supply of rental housing in lower crime neighborhoods, either by reducing building restrictions or subsidizing supply. (Lens, 2013: 131)

This statement is quite true and can be explained by cost. It is a difficult decision for PHAs to pay more money to place tenants into good neighborhoods, because the PHA could locate more voucher recipients into housing units in lower cost neighborhoods. But such lower cost units, in general, are in neighborhoods with higher crime rates. Therefore, it becomes a policy balancing decision between placing more recipients in cheaper units or placing fewer recipients into higher rent properties with less crime. In Dallas, the DHA built expensive housing in a wealthy neighborhood in North Dallas and spent approximately \$500,000 for each unit. The purpose of this building was to create integration in this neighborhood. If the DHA had placed voucher recipients into cheaper housing, however, it would have been able to provide many more units for needy individuals. Educating and empowering recipients in cheaper units to help them gain the means of improving their neighborhoods through reduced crime may go a long way in producing the same effects desired in more stable neighborhoods. Programs such as crime watch, working more closely with the local police departments, can improve the safety of neighborhoods. The DPD works hard in developing these groups through social media, meetings, and so on. The Department targets all neighborhoods and socioeconomic groups.¹

Ann Owens shows in her article the need to diversify housing throughout a city. In neighborhoods where rent is cheap, PHAs can afford to provide more vouchers, but those neighborhoods unfortunately are often on the decline. Therefore, it is counterintuitive to locate voucher holders in higher priced neighborhoods. Nevertheless, placing voucher holders throughout both high- and low-crime neighborhoods will help spread out the voucher programs and enable poor households receiving the voucher to be more likely to live cohesively with the middle class.

Boston residents perceived their neighborhoods to be less safe if more voucher users lived there, perhaps because voucher users tend to move to higher crime areas. Overall, the transformation of assisted housing appears to shape residents' perceptions of neighborhood disorder, violence, and safety in positive or neutral ways. (Owens, 2013: 77)

When residents are faced with living on the street or being provided with housing in a bad neighborhood, they will choose the bad neighborhood. High concentrations of voucher holders in a neighborhood unfortunately create pockets of poverty similar to public housing developments. Therefore, the end result is several concentrated neighborhoods throughout a city rather than concentrated public housing. Both types of neighborhoods have similar demographics and problems. The solution is to issue vouchers in disparate areas to thin the concentration. It is necessary, however, to educate voucher recipients on the benefits of moving into this type of neighborhood although their friends choose not to move. Another approach is to tear down substandard housing and to move the residents to a different section of town. Thinning out the bad housing provides a neighborhood with a better chance to grow.

¹ A list of DPD programs is available for review at <http://dallaspolice.net/community/community.html>.

David P. Varady, Xinhao Wang, Dugan Murphy, and Andrew Stahlke reveal the potential value of PHAs holding participating Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP) landlords accountable for local code violations by treating them as clients, just as they do the voucher recipients (Varady et al., 2013). The PHAs should point out “the importance of educational outreach and public relations, which would include stressing the authority’s strict screening policies against drug use and criminality” (Varady et al., 2013: 127). The authors also point out that PHAs can work with school districts and other youth agencies to help meet the needs of children living in HCVP units. Each recommendation is common sense and quite important if the PHAs are going to help to change the direction of the voucher program. In Dallas, a community engagement program targets substandard areas of town and brings the schools, churches, community leaders, and philanthropic groups together to improve the neighborhood.

Overall, these articles demonstrate a need for more flexible and creative policies in moving public housing forward as a foundation to improve public safety for all public housing tenants. As important, addressing the stigma associated with vouchers and other public housing programs is imperative. One possible solution is examining the threshold for the number of vouchers within an apartment complex to prevent their concentration. In Dallas, many apartments that became overloaded with voucher holders led to flight by those who could afford to move elsewhere. This dynamic merely perpetuated deepening problems in the neighborhoods after all the middle-class residents left. If the middle class leaves, the goal of poor residents learning from the middle class is diminished and the stigma will persist.

Finally, PHAs should invest in research to evaluate the effect and effectiveness of programs that aim to improve the quality of life of residents within various neighborhoods. Understanding what actually works is the foundation for the success of any special service or targeted policy. This research should help PHAs think about refining their policies to improve existing and future housing programs, particularly in helping improve public safety in the neighborhoods in which they are located. PHAs, however, still must determine which programs need to be introduced by neighborhoods to improve the quality of life while mitigating the cost of a unit for individuals who receive housing.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Ron Wilson from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for the opportunity to provide this commentary. The purpose of the Caruth Police Institute, where the author is assigned by the Dallas Police Department as a liaison, is to broaden the views of how law enforcement in Dallas addresses issues within society and can better serve the citizens.

Author

Mark A. Stallo is a lieutenant of police in the Dallas Police Department and a liaison at the Caruth Police Institute.

References

- Curtis, Marah A., Sarah Garlington, and Lisa S. Schottenfeld. 2013. "Alcohol, Drug Use, and Criminal History Provisions in Public Housing," *Cityscape* 15 (3): 37–52.
- Fontaine, Jocelyn. 2013. "The Role of Supportive Housing in Successful Reentry Outcomes for Disabled Prisoners," *Cityscape* 15 (3): 53–75.
- Hayes, Christopher, Graham MacDonald, Susan Popkin, Leah Hendey, and Allison Stolte. 2013. "Public Housing Transformation and Crime: Are Relocates More Likely To Be Offenders or Victims?" *Cityscape* 15 (3): 9–35.
- Lens, Michael C. 2013. "Safe, but Could Be Safer: Why Do Voucher Households Live in Higher Crime Neighborhoods?" *Cityscape* 15 (3): 131–152.
- Owens, Ann. 2013. "Perceptions of Disorder and Safety Amid the Transformation of Assisted Housing," *Cityscape* 15 (3): 77–103.
- Varady, David P., Xinhao Wang, Dugan Murphy, and Andrew Stahlke. 2013. "How Housing Professionals Perceive Effects of the Housing Choice Voucher Program on Suburban Communities," *Cityscape* 15 (3): 105–129.