

# Guest Editor's Introduction

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The symposium section in this issue of *Cityscape* represents the second set of articles devoted to research on the 4.3 million households that receive housing assistance from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).<sup>1</sup> Assisted housing is found in every metropolitan area and in every state. About 15 percent is in nonmetropolitan areas.<sup>2</sup>

The largest housing assistance program is the Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP), formerly known as tenant-based Section 8, in which households are expected to find individual housing units owned by private landlords. Approximately 1.9 million households participate in the HCVP. An additional 1.4 million households live in HUD-subsidized, privately owned multifamily projects, supported by the project-based Section 8 program and other multifamily assisted programs. Slightly under 1 million households live in public housing units that are managed by some 3,200 public housing agencies (PHAs).<sup>3</sup>

Housing assistance programs serve large numbers of vulnerable people. As of 2007, 37 percent of households receiving housing assistance were headed by an elderly person.<sup>4</sup> Another 26 percent were headed by a person who was disabled, but not elderly, and 54 percent were families with children. A small percentage, about 13 percent, fit in none of the categories listed above, such as formerly homeless individuals and people with AIDS.<sup>5</sup>

Policymakers and the public want to know more about how these housing assistance programs perform. Much can be learned from HUD's administrative records, the Housing Choice Voucher Program Customer Satisfaction Survey, and qualitative interviews with participants in the Gautreaux Two Housing Mobility Study.

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<sup>1</sup> The first issue is available at <http://www.huduser.org/periodicals/cityscape/vol8num2/>.

<sup>2</sup> The author thanks Mark Perdue for his assistance in producing these estimates. The author also thanks David Chase and Mark Shroder for helpful comments.

<sup>3</sup> Further information about these programs is available at <http://www.hud.gov/offices/pih/programs/ph/index.cfm>; <http://www.hud.gov/offices/pih/programs/hcv/project.cfm>; and <http://www.hud.gov/offices/pih/programs/hcv/tenant.cfm>.

<sup>4</sup> Elderly is defined here as 62 years and older.

<sup>5</sup> Further information about HUD's homeless assistance programs, created by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, and Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS is available at <http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/> and <http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/aidshousing/>.

In all but one case, the authors of the symposium articles are members of HUD's Research Cadre, which is supported by the Office of Policy Development and Research in order to investigate issues of policy in the administration of housing assistance. (The exception is author Melody Boyd.)

*Cityscape* policy allows guest editors wide latitude in choosing symposium articles, as long as all articles meet standards of scholarship, relevance to the mission of HUD, and thematic commonality. As the manager of the contract that funds the Research Cadre and as guest editor for this issue of *Cityscape*, I am favorably impressed by the quality of the articles presented in this issue. I deeply appreciate the cooperation and effort of the authors.

## Articles in the Symposium Section of This Issue

The authors bring a variety of theoretical and methodological tools to the research questions posed. One set of articles in this issue focuses on the issue of the extent that various aspects of housing assistance contribute to the goal of deconcentrating poverty. One article addresses the extent that the age mix of children in households that use vouchers affects the longevity of households in this program. Another article explores the extent that census tract indicators of neighborhood quality predict perceptions of neighborhood quality reported by those who use housing vouchers.

### Program Dynamics

**Carissa G. Climaco, Christopher N. Rodger, Judith D. Feins, and Ken Lam** investigated "portability" of vouchers in the HCVP. This policy allows a family to use a voucher issued in one jurisdiction to move to another jurisdiction where the program is administered by a different local public housing agency. The authors examined portability moves in the HCVP between 1998 and 2005 and analyzed household and neighborhood characteristics associated with portability moves. They found that, of the 3.4 million households that received housing assistance in the voucher program from 1998 to 2005, 8.9 percent made a portability move. The rate of portability movers was highest among African-American households (10.3 percent), compared with White households (8.1 percent) and Hispanic households (8.6 percent). The authors also found that, compared with households in the HCVP overall, portability movers are more likely to be households with young children and are more likely to have a younger head of household than households that are otherwise similar to them. The authors examined the association between length of stay and portability moves and the timing of portability moves. Most are likely to occur between the fourth and fifth years of HCVP participation. The article examines public housing jurisdictions by program costs. Three-fifths of portability moves were made to lower cost jurisdictions compared with the originating jurisdiction. The data also show reductions in census tract poverty rates for households that completed portability moves.

**Melody L. Boyd** presents the results of indepth interviews with voucher holders who participated in the Gautreaux Two Housing Mobility Program study. Her respondents were women who used vouchers to move out of segregated, highly concentrated poverty neighborhoods into more affluent areas. This qualitative analysis compares residents who made secondary moves with residents who stayed at their Gautreaux placement addresses, focusing on the role of social networks in making housing decisions. Ms. Boyd reports that secondary movers were motivated by a number of social network factors, including feelings of social isolation in the placement neighborhood, distance

from kin, and transportation difficulties. Conversely, she found that strong social networks were also crucial reasons why some families remained in their Gautreaux neighborhoods or moved on to other similarly advantaged neighborhoods.

**Xinhao Wang, David Varady, and Yimei Wang** used hot spot analysis to measure changes in spatial clustering of HCVP recipients. **The authors conducted hot spot analyses of HCVP recipients** in eight metropolitan areas (New York, Baltimore, Chicago, Cincinnati, Miami, Houston, Los Angeles, and Phoenix), using a tenant-based data system from HUD's Office of Public and Indian Housing. **The 2000 and 2005 hot spots were overlaid with 2000 Census block group data.** The hot spot results show that the tendency of HCVP households to cluster varies by metropolitan area. Moreover, no evidence indicates that HCVP clustering is declining. Although HCVP participants are becoming less concentrated in hot spots in Chicago and Phoenix, the opposite is true in other metropolitan areas, especially **New York, Cincinnati, and Baltimore.** **The authors conclude that** this type of HCVP concentration is likely to continue as long as affordable rental housing is largely confined to central cities and older inner suburbs.

**Meryl Finkel and Ken Lam** analyzed one outcome of the 1998 Quality Housing Work Responsibility Act (QHWRA), a requirement that PHAs offer the option of a flat rent (as opposed to an income-based rent) to residents of public housing. Flat rents are based on market rents and, therefore, the tenant rent does not vary with income. As of the end of 2005, about 105,000 families were identified on HUD's data system as paying flat rents. The authors found that, although nearly all PHAs have at least some flat-rent units, the proportion of flat-rent units in each PHA is generally small. Households paying flat rent have much higher incomes compared with other public housing residents. Similarly, a much higher percentage of households paying flat rent reported that the majority of their income was from wages, compared with other public housing households. Thus, flat rents appear to be succeeding in allowing residents in these units to increase income through employment and to remain in their units even as their income increases. Rents in units where residents are paying flat rents are substantially higher than in other public housing units. At the same time, households paying flat rents are virtually always paying less than 30 percent of their income for rent. Properties with flat-rent units have a higher degree of income mixing than other properties, which is to be expected, because households in units with flat rents have higher incomes than most other public housing residents have.

### **Duration of Receipt of Housing Assistance**

**Alvaro Cortes, Ken Lam, and David Fein** used HUD administrative data to explore household characteristics that are associated with a household's length of stay in the HCVP. The first is the degree to which the presence of children of varying ages is related to a household's length of stay (longevity) in the program. The second is the degree to which older children, as a potential source of childcare, may mitigate a longer duration of assistance for households containing infants and toddlers. The third is the degree to which disability status of the household head or children affect program longevity. In 1998, PHAs were given considerable discretion to select tenants on the basis of local PHAs' preferences rather than on old federal preferences for households experiencing housing-related hardships. Many PHAs adopted other categorical preferences. As a result, the demographic profile and household composition of tenants have changed. These

changes have important implications for the HCVP, because past research has found that household characteristics, as well as location factors, significantly affect a household's length of stay in the program. The authors found that the median length of stay among nonelderly households with a child or children is about 2.8 years, which is nearly two-thirds of the median (4.4 years) associated with nonelderly households with at least one disabled child. The presence of an infant or toddler increases a household's length of stay in the voucher program, after data are controlled for an array of household and location characteristics, but the presence of other children in the same household attenuates this effect. Conversely, they found that the presence of teenagers, especially boys, magnifies the lengthening of spells associated with infants and toddlers.

### **Housing Assistance and Neighborhood Quality**

Larry Buron and Satyendra Patrabansh present the results of a study examining voucher holders' ratings of their neighborhoods in HUD's HCVP Customer Satisfaction Survey. The authors found that voucher holders' neighborhood ratings were consistent with their answers to more specific questions about the attributes of their neighborhoods (that is, they were internally consistent), but that the ratings were only weakly correlated with census-based measures of neighborhood quality. Internal consistency was demonstrated by the strong correlation between neighborhood ratings and voucher holders' perception of crime problems and physical disorder in their neighborhoods. The comparison with census-based measures of the neighborhoods showed that, although a very systematic correlation exists in the expected direction between the neighborhood rating and census measures of the neighborhoods, the correlation was not very strong for any of the census variables tested. The variable with the highest correlation was the percentage of female-headed households with children, but the variable explained less than 5 percent of the variation in tenants' neighborhood ratings. Furthermore, combining multiple census variables into a single neighborhood quality indicator increased the variables' explanatory power by only a small amount.

### **Conclusion**

Changes in the legislation regulating the federal housing assistance programs occur regularly and not always in an atmosphere of clarity and understanding. The Office of Policy Development and Research is pleased to present these articles to the public, in the belief that their information can contribute to informed debate about programs that serve 4.3 million households.