



Do Poor People Make Neighborhoods Less Safe?

MATT STROUD 12:38 PM ET 1 COMMENT



In July 2008, *The Atlantic* published "[American Murder Mystery](#)," a lush, deeply reported piece by Hanna Rosin that correlated violent crime increases in cities such as Memphis, Orlando and Reading, Pennsylvania, with federal antipoverty efforts like [HOPE VI](#) and the [Housing Choice Voucher Program](#), aka Section 8.

Perhaps the most notable response to Rosin's article came from *Shelterforce*, a prominent affordable housing journal that categorized the piece as a case of "[mistaken identity](#):"

Rosin gets key facts wrong and uses others in misleading ways. She provides no evidence that the low-income families who moved to neighborhoods outside the traditional ghetto contributed significantly to the growth of poverty in those areas, let alone that they were responsible for the uptick in crime.... Though Rosin has stated, in subsequent media appearances, that her intention was to help start a conversation, the article leads - from the title down - with an exaggerated and circumstantial case.

But Rosin did, in fact, start a conversation. Its latest iteration comes in the form of a study [[PDF](#)] from New York University's Wagner School and Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy.

The study's authors, [Ingrid Gould Ellen](#), Michael C. Lens and [Katherine O'Regan](#), sought to use neighborhood-level crime and voucher data from 10 large U.S. cities to "test whether the presence of additional voucher holders leads to elevated rates of crime."

They found that "crime tends to be higher in census tracts with more voucher households." However, the authors conclude that when this data is taken in light of existing crime trends, evidence points to the "reverse" of Rosin's conclusion: crime was already on the rise in areas where voucher holders made the choice to move.

In an interview, Ellen says there are a number of reasons why this might be the case.

"There's a tendency to think it might be from community opposition but it might also be that [voucher holders] are moving to areas where rents are falling," she says. "Vacancy rates might go up

and because of this landlords might be more welcoming to renting to a voucher holder."

What's disconcerting about this, says O'Regan, is that federal housing vouchers were designed to give people greater choice about where they live. The fact that data shows they're congregating in high crime areas is cause for concern.

"Whether that results from lack of information, market conditions or community opposition, it's worrisome," she says.

Ellen and O'Regan say they hope the study's main message is that non-voucher-holders don't need to fear the use of vouchers. But questions remain. How can cities encourage voucher holders not to move into high crime areas? Unfortunately, O'Regan says, the answer is elusive and warrants further research.

"We don't know what needs to change," she says. "There hasn't been much research on the advocacy of different approaches to giving information to voucher holders. We don't know how they're navigating the housing market. Have they ever searched for housing before? We don't know how they're choosing."

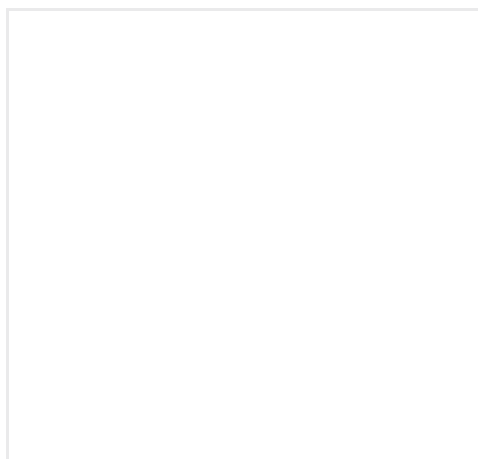
Rosin says the study seems to have "a plausible theory." And both Ellen and O'Regan agree they are not on an "agenda to prove her wrong," as O'Regan put it.

"It's really hard to get data on neighborhood level crime," O'Regan says. "Hanna's story provoked a lot of concern and it's not like she ignored an abundance of research. There just wasn't a lot of research on this topic. And we hope to begin changing that."

Keywords: Memphis, Research, Crime, Poverty, Affordable Housing



Matt Stroud writes about crime, healthcare and city issues from Pittsburgh. [All posts »](#)



Join the Discussion

Like

Type your comment here.

Post as ...

Showing 1 comment

Sort by **Newest first** Subscribe by email Subscribe by RSS

Real-time updating is **paused**. (Resume)



Pickled_Dick 59 minutes ago

My own (admittedly) anecdotal observations back this up. We live in a fairly affluent, low-crime neighborhood and there is a very large bloc of Section 8 housing about 2 1/2 blocks from us. We have seen absolutely no rise in crime and a recent check of the FBI crime statistics bear this out.

Copyright 2011 The Atlantic Media Company