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NYU Furman Center Study Finds No Evidence that Voucher Holders Cause Crime

Report finds voucher recipients more likely to move into neighborhoods with rising crime rates

Nov. 2, 2011—In the first longitudinal study to examine the link between housing vouchers and neighborhood crime rates, researchers at NYU’s Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy find no evidence to support the idea that an increase in the number of voucher holders in a community leads to increases in crime. The study, which examines neighborhood crime and housing data over 12 years in ten large US cities, finds a different type of association: voucher holders are more likely to move into areas when crime rates are increasing.

“We find that crime tends to be higher in neighborhoods with more voucher holders. However, we found no evidence that an increase in the number of voucher holders leads to more crime,” said Ingrid Gould Ellen, faculty co-director of the Furman Center and a professor at NYU’s Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. “Instead, we find that voucher holders are more likely to settle in areas with higher pre-existing crime rates.”

The paper, [*American Murder Mystery Revisited: Do Housing Voucher Households Cause Crime?*](#), was presented Sept. 19 [at a briefing](#) held at the HUD headquarters in Washington, DC.

The question of whether more voucher holders moving to a neighborhood leads to elevated crime levels was highlighted in a widely-circulated 2008 *Atlantic Monthly* article “[American Murder Mystery](#).” Such fears have led, in some cases, to strong community opposition to Housing Choice Vouchers, which subsidize rent for low-income households. The Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program (also known as Section 8) has grown significantly as federal housing policy has shifted away from public housing to tenant-based subsidies; there were 2.2 million vouchers nationwide in 2008, compared to 1.2 million public housing units.

Furman Center researchers merged neighborhood-level crime data with neighborhood-level data on voucher-holders provided by HUD, using census tracts to proxy for neighborhoods. The researchers examined the neighborhood distribution of crime and voucher use from 1996-2008 in ten cities: Austin, Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, Seattle and Washington, DC. The study uses a fixed effects approach to control for characteristics of census tracts as well as trends in crime in the broader community—testing whether crime within a given census tract increases as voucher use increases, above and beyond the crime trends occurring in the larger community.

The results show that, on average, census tracts with higher crime rates house more voucher holders, but the presence of voucher holders does not lead to increases in crime. Once researchers control for pre-existing trends in crime and neighborhood conditions, they find no statistical relationship between the concentration of voucher holders and crime.

“We find no evidence that more voucher holders in a tract predict more crime one year later,” said Professor Katherine O’Regan, a co-author of the study and a Furman Center faculty affiliate. “These findings are critically important for policymakers around the country, some of whom have discouraged the use of Section 8 vouchers in their towns and neighborhoods due to misperceptions about the relationship between crime and voucher holders.”

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About the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy

The Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy is a joint center of the New York University School of Law and the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. Since its founding in 1995, the Furman Center has become the leading academic research center in New York City devoted to the public policy aspects of land use, real estate, and housing development, and is dedicated to providing objective academic and empirical research. More information on the Furman Center can be found at: <http://furmancenter.org>