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Housing Choice Vouchers Don't Lead to Better Education

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WASHINGTON -- Over the last two decades, federal housing policy has often asserted housing choice as a goal -- to help low-income families move to neighborhoods and communities that are safer, healthier and provide better educational opportunities for their children.

But a [new study](#), "Do Federally Assisted Households Have Access to High Performing Public Schools?" demonstrates that the government has a long way to go before their objective becomes a reality for poor families. The study, commissioned by the Poverty and Race Research Action Council in Washington, D.C., [found](#) that even Americans with coveted housing choice vouchers designed to move them into better neighborhoods typically wind up living near low-performing, higher poverty schools.

By analyzing national data on elementary schools located near households receiving four major forms of federal housing assistance -- housing choice vouchers, public housing, project-based Section 8 and Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) -- the study underscores the need for significant changes in federal policy.

The authors, Ingrid Gould Ellen and Keren Horn at the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy at NYU, took a special interest in housing choice voucher recipients because these families can choose where they want to live. Despite this distinction, Ellen and Horn found that housing choice voucher holders tend to live near lower performing schools than those in project-based Section 8 or LIHTC developments. Only public housing tenants fared worse than voucher holders.

Furthermore, it's clear from their research that race plays a significant role in where families receiving housing assistance get to live. Ellen and Horn found that families receiving housing assistance in less racially segregated areas had a higher chance of living near quality schools. It's likely that race-based residential discrimination contributes to making it more difficult for minority voucher recipients to find living space in these better communities.

The authors also found that white voucher holders live near schools that rank on average 20 percentile points higher than those near African American voucher holders and 15 percent higher than those near Latino voucher holders.

Given that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development spends \$18 billion a year on housing choice vouchers, policymakers, as well as all Americans, should be concerned about these findings. Clearly, there is a gap between the objectives of the nation's public housing policy and what actually happens in communities across the country.

Elementary schools play a critical role in a child's development. A 2010 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found, for example, that students who attend kindergarten with high performing classmates enjoy higher test scores throughout primary school and [receive](#) higher income as adults. Research from the [National Coalition on School Diversity](#) underscores this point. Access to economically and racially diverse education is a crucial pathway out of poverty, and is one of the most effective ways to address the racial achievement gap. America needs more programs that improve educational opportunities for low-income families, not ones that build more hurdles for their children to have successful life outcomes.

The PRRAC study's results are especially worrisome for Hispanics, as Latino children are more likely to be impoverished than their white or black counterparts. As a result they, more than other groups, need federal housing assistance that provides a bridge to lead out of poverty. Because Hispanics age 25 and up are also [less likely](#) than their black or white peers to have graduated from college, they not only need access to affordable housing but also access to schools that will give them the skills needed to pursue higher education.

By 2050, analysts predict that Hispanics [will make up](#) 80 percent of new employees in the U.S. workforce. Our nation won't effectively compete in the global marketplace if one of its fastest growing groups continues to face barriers to quality education.

As the wealth gap widens in our country, the study findings are particularly salient. An affordable home or apartment in a quality community can connect families to broader opportunities by providing access to quality schools, stable jobs and safer and healthier outdoor space. This not only helps individuals, but is an investment in our nation's future economy -- in particular by connecting children to better schools.

We know access to a high performing secondary school greatly impacts our children, determining whether they will graduate from high school or go on to attend an institution of higher learning. Our nation will be irrevocably harmed if we continue to allow a vast educational achievement gap to exist between rich and the poor.

Philip Tegeler is executive director of the Policy and Race Research Action Council, a civil rights policy organization based in Washington, D.C. For more information about PRRAC, please go to www.prrac.org.