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## Report challenges tie between housing vouchers, crime

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Renters' use of housing choice vouchers, more commonly known as Section 8 vouchers, long has worried communities that the arrival of voucher-holding tenants in a neighborhood will lead to crime and, eventually, lower property values.

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That's not true, says a new policy brief by researchers who studied crime patterns and voucher use in Chicago and nine other large cities over a number of years.

The study by New York University's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy found that housing vouchers don't bring crime to an area. Rather, very low-income people using the vouchers often have limited options and tend to live in areas where crime already is high.

Housing choice vouchers are different than project-based assistance. Started as the Section 8 Rental Assistance Program by President Nixon in 1974, vouchers allow an eligible renter to find privately owned rental housing and a landlord that will accept a voucher. The tenant pays a portion of the rent and public agencies pay the rest directly to the landlord.

For its study, researchers looked at neighborhood-level data on voucher use and crime in the 10 cities, and whether the number of voucher holders in an area one year led to an increase in crime the following year. The study took into account differences between neighborhoods and other factors that might lead to an increase in crime in some areas.

Researchers found no evidence, even in poor neighborhoods, that an increase in voucher use directly led to more crime. But they did find something.

"If you do look at any given point in time, you do see a correlation, a weak one," said Ingrid Gould Ellen, a professor and co-director Furman Center. "But what seems to be driving that correlation is that voucher (users) tend to rent in neighborhoods where crime is already occurring."

That may be because voucher recipients live in those neighborhoods because they can't afford to rent anywhere else, and landlords in better areas are more able to command market-rate rents. Or it may be because landlords in better neighborhoods are worried about a potential increase in crime.

Either way, Ellen believes the results are important, especially in cities like Chicago that are trying to move low-income residents into better neighborhoods.

This isn't the first study of its kind, and not the first to come to this conclusion. About a year ago, a study by the Urban Institute looked at the relocation of public housing residents in Chicago and Atlanta. It, too, concluded that tearing down public housing and giving its residents vouchers to find housing in the private marketplace led to a citywide reduction in crime and also decreased crime in the former public complex neighborhoods.

Ellen understands the perceptions, as people worry about their property values and safety levels. She, like others associated with the issues, doesn't expect this study, or the ones that preceded it, to sway long-held public perceptions, but it's a step in the right direction.

"It's an age-old issue," said Christine Klepper, executive director of Housing Choice Partners, a Chicago non-profit that helps voucher holders find housing. "Perceptions develop over a very long period of time and they are hard to change. More studies like this that show the myth or the perception isn't the case, it's important for people to hear."

Rich Monocchio, executive director of the Housing Authority of Cook County, agrees and is more blunt.

"You have to keep countering this notion. It's no crime to be poor," he said. "Just because you have a voucher doesn't have anything to do with whether you're going to commit a crime or not. In the program, we screen people and the landlords screen people too."

Almost 8,000 landlords are in Cook County's housing choice program. Currently, there are 700 families on the waiting list, but when someone leaves the program, the county cannot offer a voucher to someone on that list. The federal sequester has translated to a \$7 million loss to the local program.

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