Book Review

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David P. Varady and Carole C. Walker, *Neighbourhood Choices. Section 8 Housing Vouchers and Residential Mobility*, New Brunswick (NJ), Center for Urban Policy Research–CUPR Press, 2007, pp. 184, ISBN 0-88285-180-2

After World War II the federal policy in the U.S. to provide decent housing for poor people was focussed on the development of public housing estates, mostly high rises at the outskirts of cities. An increasing number of these estates became the symbols of stigma: they housed a high concentration of unemployed, mostly black families, and more and more crime and vandalism became concentrated in these estates. In the early 1980s the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) changed its policy and started a strategy to deconcentrate poverty and reduce the segregation of low-income families.

Earlier, in 1970, the Experimental Housing Allowance Program (EHAP) was launched, which tied housing assistance to families instead of units. Later on, we observe efforts to disperse federally subsidized private housing and public housing on scattered sites in the suburbs. The income-related support by housing allowances was transformed into the current Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers Program, where selected families receive federal assistance and can choose where they would like to live in the private rental market. In the 1990s the HOPE VI program was implemented, aimed at revitalizing distressed public housing projects by redeveloping them as mixed-income communities and providing some of the residents with housing vouchers to be used in the private housing market. We learned a new term: these families were ‘vouchered out’ of public housing estates. All these programs sought to provide wider housing opportunities for selected families and to make it possible for them to improve their lives.

In the late 1980s the Section 8 program underwent a significant change. ‘Portability’ was implemented, allowing families to use the Section 8 assistance outside the jurisdiction of the housing authority where they receive assistance. This concept of portability was expanded to allow a family to move anywhere in the United States.

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Of course practitioners and researchers were interested in the types of housing and neighbourhoods the families chose and the factors that influenced those choices. They wanted to know whether the Section 8 housing assistance and the location of the housing unit chosen by the families really enabled them to improve their living conditions, including an increasing participation in the labour market and an improved education of their children.

In 1993 a study by Joseph Villarreal was conducted, who found that portability in Alameda County (San Francisco Bay Area) tended to occur between adjacent PHA (Public Housing Administration) jurisdictions and that the highest portability usage was occurring in Alameda County (with 13 cities and about 1.44 million inhabitants in 2000; the city of Oakland is the largest city of this county). Between 1987 and mid 1994, the Housing Authority of Alameda County (HACA) received more than 1,200 Section 8 families who used the portability feature to move from the jurisdictions of other PHAs. Villarreal found that in 1994 55% of the incoming Section 8 Oakland families moved to just 17 census tracts in Alameda County's jurisdiction. Half the Section 8 Oakland portable families came from just 18 census tracts in Oakland. The census tracts from which they had moved had poverty rates of slightly more than 20%, while those to which they had moved had poverty rates of less than 13%. More than 90% of the Oakland movers were black. They moved from census tracts that were 61% black to ones where blacks made up 11% of the total. Oakland's portable families were experiencing positive mobility impacts on average. In the meantime HUD launched mobility programs such as Moving to Opportunity (MTO) and Regional Opportunity Counselling. There was a wish to conduct more rigorous research on the Alameda County experience to determine if there were lessons that could be learned for the development of national mobility policies. David P. Varady and Carole C. Walker have a convincing track record in evaluating the vouchersing out processes of distressed housing developments. They were also involved in the Alameda County experience in the San Francisco Bay Area, where many families made use of the option of 'portability' of housing vouchers. This research, supported by HUD, was conducted by Varady and Walker, who analysed the mobility patterns of the households involved and the decision-making process the families go through in making housing moves.

The book *Neighborhood Choices. Section 8 Housing Vouchers and Residential Mobility* is the culmination of several years of research, dealing with the following research questions:

- To what extent had families receiving HUD housing vouchers been able to improve their housing and neighbourhood conditions?
- To what extent had families who were vouchersing out of distressed public estates been able to improve their housing and neighbourhood conditions?
- To what extent had families, using the portability option with housing vouchers in Alameda County, been able to improve their housing and neighbourhood conditions?

Varady and Walker had published earlier on the two HUD studies in articles between 1999 and 2003. Revised versions of some of these articles have been used for the book *Neighborhood Choices*.

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of housing vouchers and the reasons for interest in the approach as a means of deconcentrating assisted housing. The authors review the significance of results from the Gautreaux and MTO programs and from research on the regular operation of the Section 8 voucher program. Finally, the research on the benefits of mixed-income neighbourhoods for low-income families is summarized.

Chapter 2 introduces the vouchersing-out study (the study methodology, the socioeconomic and housing market characteristics of the four cities, and differences in the vouchersing-out

process and in the relocation counselling). It then describes the housing search process of the vouchered-out residents (the duration and scope of the housing search, the level and nature of discrimination that residents experienced). Next, it examines the migration patterns of the residents and the impacts these patterns had on their quality of life. Despite the fact that many did not want to move at all, after the move, most felt that they had improved their housing and neighbourhood conditions as a result of the move. Certain types of counselling did help families carry out their moves. Contrary to what was expected, however, those who moved farther and who lived in more suburban-like settings were not necessarily more likely to be satisfied with their housing.

The discussion of the Alameda housing voucher study in Chapter 3 begins with an overview of the East Bay area (including a description of the three housing authorities in the county) and a description of the methodology of the study—a comparative analysis of families making different locational choices after receiving their Section 8 vouchers. Probing into the families' experiences, the analysis by Varady and Walker of the housing search produces a surprising result: Families moving to the suburbs were no more likely to experience problems in carrying out their housing search than those making local moves. Similarly, in contrast to findings in previous research, those moving to the suburbs were no more likely to experience problems of adjustment at their new locations than were local movers. Even though they did not receive any special help from any of the housing authorities, these families actually fared quite well. In fact, they were more likely to move into neighbourhoods with higher incomes and property values than were local movers. Furthermore, those moving to the suburbs were more likely to perceive that they had experienced improvements in housing and neighbourhood conditions; they especially felt a greater sense of safety.

Chapter 4 summarizes the lessons learned from the studies and offers suggestions for making the regular housing voucher program more effective in promoting wider housing choices by low-income families.

Varady and Walker conclude that a more incremental approach is needed than the wide-scale implementation of the federal MTO program. An improved Section 8 program could be combined with socioeconomic programs aimed at the root causes of poverty. Up to now, Varady and Walker conclude, too little attention has been given to ways to improve the operation of the regular Section 8 housing voucher program. An improved Section 8 voucher program could make a modest contribution to reducing patterns of income and racial segregation.

The book is well written and well documented. It is an authoritative overview of recent experience in the United States with housing vouchers and the residential mobility of the families involved. It is highly recommended for every housing researcher and housing policy analyst.

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