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WASHINGTON-Social scientists and policy makers have long understood the harmful effects that living in high poverty neighborhoods can have on children and adults. Numerous studies underscore the links between neighborhood disadvantage and a host of social problems, including high school dropout, infant mortality, cognitive difficulties, teenage childbearing and exposure to violence.

These studies show that families living in high poverty neighborhoods face burdens beyond their individual resource constraints in finding jobs, staying safe and raising children. After falling during the decade of the 1990s, both the number of neighborhoods of extreme concentrated poverty and the number of people living in such neighborhoods rose during the past decade, such that 10 percent of poor people now live in extremely high poverty neighborhoods.

Starting in the 1990s, the federal government significantly reshaped housing policy to address the problem of concentrated poverty. Recognizing that public housing projects were creating the very environments they were designed to eliminate, Congress authorized the HOPE VI program in 1992. This program provided funding to demolish public housing complexes, in many cases replacing them with mixed income communities. While these new communities were intended to reduce poverty concentration by encouraging middle class and poor families to share the same neighborhood, the HOPE VI program did not give residents a right to return to the redeveloped community, and failed to provide one-for-one replacement of public housing units. This contributed to a reduction the nation's supply of public housing, and also meant that many of the original tenants would not be part of the newly developed community.

The families who did not or could not return to public housing after HOPE VI joined the millions of poor families already participating in the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program. HCV (formerly Section 8) is the largest housing program in the country, subsidizing over 2.2 million households, twice the number served by traditional public housing projects. The voucher program provides tenants with a rent subsidy which they can use to lease any private-market unit renting at or lower than 40-50 percent of the

metropolitan area median rent.

Because vouchers are not attached to specific developments, the HCV program should theoretically work to deconcentrate poverty by allowing poor families to move to more affluent neighborhoods than they would otherwise be able to afford.

Yet despite this potential, voucher holders usually struggle to move out of poor neighborhoods -on the whole, they are no more likely to relocate to low-poverty communities than poor renters who do not receive federal housing assistance. There are also significant racial differences in the program. Minority voucher users are even less likely than whites to move to better communities, and the proportion of voucher recipients in such neighborhoods shrinks when recipients are mostly black and unassisted households are mostly white. In sum, the HCV program falls short of its full potential to facilitate moves by low-income families out of poor neighborhoods.

A multi-year study of family dynamics and housing mobility that we conducted in Mobile, Alabama helps explain why the program doesn't work as designed.

While the story of housing and segregation is well known in larger "rust belt" cities in the Northeast and Midwest, less is known about how these processes play out in smaller cities, and cities in the South. Almost a quarter of the HCV households in the Mobile area live in the highest poverty neighborhoods. Between 2009 and 2012, we talked with more than 100 low income African American families across Mobile about the places they had lived in the past, their reasons for moving, and their neighborhood characteristics, children, finances, and family dynamics.

The difficulties begin before the families even receive their subsidy. Because the supply of vouchers lags far behind the demand, housing authorities often maintain waitlists that are thousands of names long. In many cities, the names on the waitlists are so stale that administrators have abandoned a "first come, first served" policy and instead select families randomly when turnover vouchers become available.

Once families do receive their voucher, they are limited in the amount of time they have to search for a unit. With such a high demand, housing authorities are under pressure to rescind the voucher if a family can't find a unit in the allotted time, in order to let the next person on the waitlist use it.

Mothers responded to this time crunch in a number of ways that reduced their chances of moving out of poor neighborhoods and into higher opportunity areas. Some relied on their social networks to refer them to a landlord-this common practice eased anxiety about running out of search time and being left without housing, but often meant that families took a housing unit in a poor or segregated neighborhood, because a relative in such a neighborhood saw a "for rent" sign down the street, or were themselves renting from the same landlord.

Another significant factor that limits the geographic scope of the housing search is "the list," a sheet of available properties and participating landlords given to families by the housing

authority. Many people said the list was their primary resource during the housing search, and some believed (incorrectly) that they were not allowed to use their vouchers at places which weren't on the list. After reviewing the list, we found that there were nearly 200 properties on it, but only nine were in non-segregated neighborhoods in the city, and only seven were in non-poor neighborhoods.

Clearly, families who use the HCV program face a number of constraints that limit their ability to make a careful, calculated search for housing. Not only do they face difficulties finding affordable housing where landlords will take their voucher in the first place, but with the loud ticking clock on their voucher, they are often forced into desperate and last minute choices about where to live. Landlord referrals, the housing authority's limited property list, and a general unfamiliarity with better off neighborhoods helped channel families into other poor, segregated neighborhoods. Under these circumstances, it would be misleading to say that many of the families were affirmatively "choosing" their neighborhoods.

These barriers are reinforced by some aspects of the HCV program's administration that reduce the capacity and incentive for public housing authorities to implement programs that leverage vouchers to deconcentrate poverty. For example, the way that HUD has traditionally chosen to set maximum "Fair Market Rents" (FMRs), at the 40th (or 50th) percentile of overall metropolitan rents, tends to place rental units in many higher opportunity communities out of reach.

While the constraints are daunting, there are policy changes that can directly impact them, some of which are currently under consideration at HUD:

Give more weight to the poverty deconcentration factor in the tool HUD uses to evaluate the administration of HCV.

Streamline the portability process.

Experiment with smaller area FMR limits, which would set voucher rents by zip code rather than metropolitan area, thus increasing the rent limit in better neighborhoods while decreasing it in high poverty ones.

Extend the voucher search time, especially for families who are trying to rent the difficult to find units in better neighborhoods.

Expand special "mobility programs" that have been implemented in several metropolitan areas; these programs provide counseling to low-income, minority families to help them find housing in low poverty or non-segregated neighborhoods and to stay there.

While the nation's public housing policy is touted as allowing poor families the freedom and "choice" to move to better neighborhoods, our research shows that is frequently not the case. The reality is that many low-income families are stuck living in high poverty, racially segregated areas.

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