Location Patterns of Section 8 Housing in Jefferson County, Kentucky

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ABSTRACT

The controversial Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program is the largest federal low-income housing program. Using GIS-based spatial clustering analysis (Getis-Ord’s Gi statistic) and multiple linear regressions, in this paper, the authors examine the locational patterns of more than 13,600 Section 8 housing units in Jefferson County, Kentucky, and explore key social, economic, demographic, and locational factors underlying the spatial distribution of Section 8 housing. The findings reveal that Section 8 housing continues to concentrate in the central city area with predominantly black residents, a high proportion of families in poverty, and abundant low-cost properties. The Section 8 voucher policy has failed to successfully de-concentrate poor families from these urban areas. Residential mobility of low-income families has been restricted by various factors, most important of which is the lack of accessibility to public transportation across the metropolitan area.

Keywords: Location Factors, Low Income Housing, Public Assistance, Residential Mobility, Section 8 Housing, Spatial Clustering

INTRODUCTION

In many metropolitan areas of the United States, predominantly minority low-income families are trapped in physically deteriorated and economically distressed inner-city neighborhoods. The number of neighborhoods in which a majority or near majority of residents live below the federal poverty level has increased dramatically over the past three decades (Goering, Stebbings, & Siewert, 1995).

Many have argued that the geographic distribution of subsidized housing in the United States has contributed to concentrated poverty in many areas (Brooks, Zugazaga, Wolk, & Adams, 2005; Goering et al., 1995; Goetz, 2003; Holloway, Bryan, Chabot, Roger, & Rulli, 1998; Varady & Walker, 2007). In many metropolitan areas public housing has been placed in the poorest neighborhoods and in neighborhoods with the highest percentage of minority residents. Other publicly subsidized housing developments have also tended to be geographically concentrated in central cities and other disadvantaged neighborhoods.
Holloway et al. (1998), in a study of Franklin County (Columbus), Ohio, demonstrated there were more blacks than whites living under poverty in public housing and that neighborhoods with public housing tend to have more at-risk population than do surrounding areas. Many argued that public housing was used to concentrate low-income persons in central cities and was assigned to tenants on the basis of their race (Coulibaly, Green, & James, 1998). This concentration of subsidized units has anchored poor and, increasingly, minority residents in these neighborhoods. The human costs of concentrated poverty are compounded by the increasing spatial isolation of these areas from the mainstream of the society and economy. The extreme concentration of poverty produces a range of social and economic problems whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. For example, negative behavioral and attitudinal outcomes, school delinquency, school dropout, teenage pregnancy, out-of-wedlock childbirth, violent crime, drug abuse rates, and unemployment rates all tend to be greater in these communities (Goetz, 2003; Wilson, 1987).

Policymakers have responded with programs designed to de-concentrate the poor through a greater dispersal of subsidized-housing residents. In recent years, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has shifted its policy focus from the provision of project-based housing assistance (in which the subsidy is tied to a particular unit that is fixed in space, typically in lower-income neighborhoods) to the provision of tenant-based assistance (in the form of vouchers that allow greater locational choice by families). This policy shift reflects the HUD’s goal of reducing concentration of poverty and providing access to affordable housing opportunities throughout the metropolitan areas (Clark, 2005; Varady & Walker, 2003a; Wang & Varady, 2005).

The Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCV), commonly known as Section 8, provides rental assistance to low-income households who obtain housing in the private rental market. The voucher allows families to rent units above the fair market rent (FMR) as long as they pay the difference between the government-established FMR limit and the actual rent. This provision enables Section 8 families to expand their housing search to previously unaffordable neighborhoods. Since the late 1980s, Congress and HUD have tried to further increase the “portability” of Section 8 assistance, that is, the ability of a household given Section 8 in one city to use it in a neighboring community. This policy allows those who receive their assistance from central-city jurisdictions to search suburban areas, thus facilitating a greater spread of assisted households. Differing from old public housing projects and other HUD housing subsidies, the success of the HCV program depends upon the ability of participants to search for and find suitable housing in the private rental market. Because the program encourages participants to avoid high-poverty neighborhoods, and encourages the recruitment of landlords with rental properties in lower-poverty neighborhoods, it is believed to have the potential to affect both the welfare of participants and the welfare of the neighborhoods where they live (Devine, Gray, Rubin, & Taghavi, 2003).

Researches and government studies have noted an apparent lessening of racial and economic impacts from section 8 certificates and vouchers, and the success of Section 8 in providing voucher holders with increased mobility (Anderson et al., 2003; Anthony, 2005; Brooks et al., 2005; Goering, Kanely, & Richardson, 1997; Goering et al., 1995; Judd, 1997; PD&R, 2000; Rosenbaum, Reynolds, & DeLuca, 2002). For instance, the Gautreaux housing program in Chicago is a classic experiment of tenant-based public housing practice. It has received a great deal of positive publicity. The program provided access to private-sector apartments either in mostly white suburbs or within the City of Chicago. Rosenbaum et al. (2002) showed that suburban movers were more likely to find jobs, and children of suburban movers dropped out of school less frequently and were more likely to go on to college than those in inner cities. Goering et al. (1995) noted that rental assistance recipients were less likely to live in racially and economically isolated neighborhoods than