

Principles for Future Rental Housing Experiments and Research

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On February 13, 2008 the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University convened a meeting of researchers, advocates, and practitioners to discuss the future of rental housing research and experiments. The objective was to gather specialists together to share ideas for how best to advance rental housing policy through future research and experimentation. The discussion was part of ongoing research supported by the MacArthur Foundation to better understand the role and impact of rental housing in the United States.

While many views were expressed, there was broad consensus that a great deal has been learned about housing assistance from past research, even though the overwhelming majority of the research to-date has been without an experimental design. Although the initial intent was to focus on experimental research designs because of the more conclusive evidence about treatment effects it can yield, participants believed that an exclusive focus on experimental research was too constraining. Participants generally agreed that experimental research would be desirable, but many underscored the value of non-experimental research as a lower cost way to capitalize on information already being collected that can yield useful insights into the conduct of rental policy and the effectiveness of rental programs.

Several aspects of what makes housing unique and housing assistance complicated to evaluate were also articulated. First, on a per-household basis, housing assistance is a large transfer payment relative to others like food stamps or Temporary Aid to Needy Families.¹ Therefore its gain or loss has especially large impacts on eligible households. Second, it is not an entitlement, and therefore only a fraction of households in need receive it. As a consequence, those who give up assistance cannot easily regain it. Third, the delivery of rental assistance involves a complex web of rules and regulations and is scaled to the income of the recipient. This means that extra work effort is in a sense “taxed” by reducing the amount of housing assistance for which a rental household is eligible as their income increases. It also means that the supply of housing available for certain programs, like the voucher, is subject to the willingness of private landlords to participate and is located where the market allows lower-cost rentals and where the

¹ HUD, in its Performance and Accountability Report of 2007, estimates that the average payment is \$6,800 per year (p. 192).

federal government has only limited control. Fourth, housing is an unusually heterogeneous good attached to a whole bundle of attributes. Its characteristics and quality is highly variable and determine exposure to home health risks. In addition, each home is at a unique location which governs access to jobs, public schools, social networks, stores and amenities, as well as travel costs and exposure to different neighborhood conditions. Thus, disentangling the influence of rental assistance on its recipients involves controlling for neighborhood conditions, housing quality, and the influence of receiving housing assistance on neighborhood and housing quality choices of eligible households. Fifth, the recipients of housing aid may also participate in other government programs (such as job training, childcare services, and employment search) or transfer payments (as is the case with the elderly, the disabled and poor families). Isolating the impact of housing assistance on things like employment and educational outcomes therefore is challenging. Understanding the impact of layering these forms of assistance is even more so and demands controlled administration of these forms of assistance. Lastly, households move with some frequency and the pace at which they move and where they move from and to over time can have influences on outcomes that are tough to gauge.

Those in attendance were also in agreement that provision of decent, affordable housing to needy families is critical and should remain the primary goal of housing programs. The participants also agreed that housing can play a vital role in stabilizing family finances and provide an opportunity to achieve goals beyond housing affordability. The discussion focused particularly on self-sufficiency (using rental assistance alone or in tandem with services to increase work efforts and returns to those efforts in the labor market) and on mobility (using rental assistance to help low-income renters live in places with better schools, less crime, greater access to quality environmental amenities, and readier access to employment). Not extensively discussed, but frequently mentioned by those gathered, was the value of housing preservation and construction to revitalizing neighborhoods, as well as the vital role of housing in promoting good health and educational achievement. These were seen as uses of rental assistance that should be the subject of an additional session intended to explore the most important research needs and opportunities to inform preservation and revitalization policies.

It is worth emphasizing that, for the sake of having a detailed and focused discussion on mobility and self-sufficiency experiments, the meeting concentrated on demand-side rental housing policy only. Several people at the meeting suggested that the Joint Center convene a similar

session to discuss research on supply-side rental programs and policies. Not only is project-based assistance an important part of rental assistance but it is often a key part of neighborhood revitalization efforts, on the one hand, and targeted efforts to build new affordable rentals in fast-growing areas that might otherwise lack them, on the other. As with the demand-side, there are significant opportunities for both experimental and non-experimental research on the supply-side to help bring greater clarity to its impacts and precision to its use as a place-based tool.²

Principles for Rental Policy Experiments and Research

There were several views expressed on the soundness of past research findings, results of past programs, and the potential direction that future research should take to encourage mobility and economic self-sufficiency goals. Nevertheless, throughout the discussions several themes emerged that can serve as principles for foundations and policymakers to help guide their decisions on future research into rental housing policy. These eight principles are fundamental characteristics that rental research programs should adhere to.

1) Be Clearly Defined in Scope and Terms

Future rental experiments need to be clear and focused. Before beginning, terms such as ‘mobility’ and ‘self-sufficiency’ need to be clearly and specifically defined. These terms have been assigned multiple definitions of varying degrees of precision in the past. Treatments, in turn, need to be specifically targeted to achieving these goals, with measures appropriate to gauging specific impacts and expectations in line with the treatments given.

In past programs, ‘self-sufficiency’ has meant everything from finding a job to earning additional wages to graduating from income supports such as TANF or food stamps to moving from subsidized to unsubsidized housing. Though not common in the past, some have argued that positive outcomes could also be mental health related and, for children, education related. Therefore, a good operational definition of an improved self sufficiency outcome would specify the type of self-sufficiency. For example, define it as graduation from housing assistance into unsubsidized housing. Working off of this definition, a program could focus on treatments specific to helping put residents in a position to afford market-rate housing on their own. Such a

² For example, the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program has still not been evaluated for its impact on resident outcomes, though it is the largest supply-side rental housing program that has led to the construction of over a million units of affordable housing, some of which has been in low-poverty neighborhoods.

program could be targeted to focus on already full-time employed tenants, and could include one or more of career advancement programs that help them get higher paying and more stable jobs, asset building programs to help workers save for down payments or security deposits, and transition programs to help residents with their personal finances and budgets so that they know what they can afford. It could also include relocation assistance with help finding and moving into unsubsidized housing.

Another example of a good operational definition of an improved self-sufficiency outcome is moving from chronic unemployment into the labor force. Such a definition would involve specifically targeting unemployed residents and those chronically unemployed with one or more of a variety of services that involve education and job-training, employment counseling, transportation assistance, childcare, and other services geared to help residents enter and remain in the labor force. It could also mean work requirements attached to receiving benefits or services.

Mobility, like self-sufficiency, has held multiple definitions in past programs and needs to be clearly defined with specific treatments, measures, and expectations for improvement in line with these goals. A specific concern for mobility programs is whether success is found in simply moving a family out of a 'bad' neighborhood into a 'good' one, or whether it is found in the actual impact of the move on the family. In either case, the target neighborhoods should hold the amenities viewed as relevant to improving the outcomes or neighborhood conditions of the participating family. Mobility programs have come with many expectations of improved safety, school quality, housing quality, accessibility to employment centers, desegregation, or lower concentrations of poor families. But target neighborhoods have been identified only by simple characteristics of race or poverty level.

An example of a good operational definition of mobility would be increased access to high-quality schools through locating in school districts that have high test scores or success in placing high school students in colleges. While the effects on educational outcomes were measured in the Gautreaux program as well as in the Moving to Opportunities program, past relocation treatments were intended to result in moves to neighborhoods with lower poverty or greater racial integration, not higher school quality. Focusing on this single desirable goal for relocation, such a program would target families with children living in schools rated poorly on the no child left behind measures and provide assistance to help them move into areas with highly rated schools. Measurements could then track the educational outcomes of these children after moving to the

high-quality school, with the potential for a significant positive, long-term impact. As stated at the meeting, though much improvement can be expected from adults in assisted housing by moving to different neighborhoods, the greatest potential for improvement is with their children, and foundations should consider funding research on policies with such potential.

Another example of a good operational definition of mobility would be increased access to employment. Focused on helping residents travel to work, such a program would focus on moves to areas where jobs, job-training programs, or future work opportunities are more accessible given their current transportation options. One example program could assist in moves to areas near metro transportation hubs and provide a transit pass and possibly daycare. Outside areas with good public transportation, programs could also work to increase these transportation options through autos. For each intervention, the various needs and reasons driving families to relocate should be reflected in the services administered and the types of neighborhoods families are steered into program measures, and expected outcomes.

With clear goals such as graduating from housing subsidy or ending chronic unemployment, or improving educational outcomes or access to employment, future self-sufficiency and mobility programs with specific treatments focused on specific outcomes offer the potential for having measurable direct impacts, but would also allow researchers to learn from the experience to improve future programs even if the results are disappointing.

Lastly, while the intervention should be clear and direct in its approach and measurement of intended impacts, *data collection should be broad enough to allow for unexpected benefits of the treatment to be identified and measured, lest interventions successful at providing a benefit other than the intended benefit be missed.* This is especially true for mobility programs. However much greater precision is brought to the selection of neighborhoods most likely to achieve a desired outcome, the move to that neighborhood invariably results in changes in many neighborhood conditions and access compared to where the recipient previously lived. Thus, it is important to understand these additional changes and have a data collection strategy that tests for a wide range of potential impacts. Data collection costs are low while design and experiment costs high so it makes sense to err on the side of collecting extra data than not enough.

2) Be Cross-Disciplinary

Many issues that rental aid recipients face are not housing problems. Rather, they are rooted in health, education, or employment outcomes that produce problems of their own and ultimately reduce tenant incomes and options. Without the necessary expertise, and already stretched for resources, housing agencies are often not the best equipped to handle these non-housing issues. It therefore is essential for housing professionals to not act alone in the next generation of rental housing programs and experiments. If goals of improved health, education, or work outcomes are to be included, the next generation of rental housing policy research should be created and implemented with the help of professionals from these other disciplines. This includes incorporating existing programs from these sectors that have already been proven to be effective.

The transfer of expertise is a two-way street. In addition to incorporating outside expertise, housing agencies can make their expertise available to educational agencies pursuing other initiatives like No Child Left Behind. Not all “housing-plus” other service initiatives need to be conceived and structured primarily as housing programs. Being a component of existing labor or educational improvement programs could open up new resources for housing, increase scalability and keep housing professionals from re-creating programs outside their areas of expertise.

The silo-like division of resources and focus within the government is a major barrier to building effective multi-sector programs for assisting tenants and multi-disciplinary teams from designing and evaluating them. It will be crucial to cross over disciplinary lines to combine both expertise and funding streams necessary for layering of services to happen and be effective. That scholars and researchers are divided along these disciplinary lines as well is further cause for intentionally seeking and requiring cross-disciplinary research teams in the creation and implementation of future rental housing policy research.

Foundations and policy makers can help foster this collaboration, and should consider funding meetings in which scholars with different backgrounds discuss and design cross-disciplinary experiments. Foundations and policy-makers should also demand cross-disciplinary teams to design evaluations of these programs. Collaboration with other disciplines will enable school officials and service providers to create better proposals for non-housing interventions that can be merged with housing programs, which may be more cost-effective.

3) Have a Clear Division of Labor

In order to be successful, cross-disciplinary initiatives that involve housing plus something more need to have a clear division of labor. Each participating organization must have a clear role and be able to focus on doing what they do best. At the meeting, it was mentioned that many “housing-plus” interventions fail to get buy-in from service providers, who fail to deliver on their side of the interventions. This stems from several shortcomings of past interdisciplinary initiatives including: 1) a failure to involve the expertise of relevant health, educational, or employment service professionals from the beginning, 2) a failure of program designers to clarify the exact roles and responsibilities for each service professional and keep them in line with their specific areas of expertise, 3) the failure to keep performance targets of each of these different sectors in line with the goals of the program so that each service provider has an incentive to work (or at least does not have a disincentive against working) together toward common objectives, and 4) calling upon housing agencies to do too much outside their area of expertise.

One idea that had general agreement among participants was that instead of creating a new infrastructure of programs, organizations, and initiatives outside the housing realm, every effort should be made to tap existing programs and organizations. In this view, housing tie-ins within non-housing led initiatives should be pursued with equal vigor as non-housing service tie-ins to housing led initiatives. In all cases there should be equal emphasis and commitment from both housing and non-housing sides of the partnerships.

An example of a research program with clear division of labor that was also cross-disciplinary in design is Jobs-Plus. In order for a city to be eligible to participate in the Jobs-Plus demonstration, it was required that partnerships be formed between housing agencies, welfare departments, workforce development service providers, and other relevant non-profit service providers. The different partners were expected to lend different types of resources and expertise to the design and implementation of the program.

4) Be Scalable

It is essential that future rental housing research provides a template that can be copied nationwide. In practice, this means an emphasis on simple, straightforward, and cost-conscious solutions that can be quickly and widely implemented within the existing framework of housing programs and the skill set of housing practitioners. Political scalability also is a factor.

There are many potential treatments that are scalable because of their simplicity that, once tested, could be implemented across the board in short time with little cost. The first such solution is to test a simple rent-based work incentive, such as instituting flat rents in place of income-based rents, to give tenants more incentive to increase work and earned income. Jobs-Plus sites used this type of incentive in combination with income-based rents as a safety net. Slightly more involved would be to use simple tiered rent-levels. Of all the work incentive ideas discussed, rent reforms to promote work had the most support as relatively simple treatments that have not yet been fully tested either on their own or in combination with one or more non-housing services. Participants pointed out that rent reforms to promote work may have many benefits, and a small number of rent levels would simplify the rent setting processes for public housing authorities while allowing tenants to earn some additional income before any rent increases are imposed.

Another example is an approach that builds on the Family Self-Sufficiency program and incorporates an escrow account that grows as families' earnings grow. This has the benefit of getting families used to paying higher rents as their income grows while also helping them accumulate assets. While it is not quite as simple as a rent matrix, it is also not hard to implement and more than 1,000 housing authorities already have FSS programs. Some changes to the design may be needed if the program were to be expanded exponentially to address cost issues, but similar issues apply to all rent reforms.

Participants also noted that scalable solutions need not be rent-only interventions like the two examples above, and should not come at the expense of potentially helpful service interventions, which data have shown to be effective in combination with rent interventions and in need of further testing in combination and by themselves.

Marketing strategies aimed at achieving self-sufficiency and/or mobility also were discussed as simple, low-cost strategies that might be easily tested and replicated. Marketing ideas included showcasing to tenants the benefits to additional work, or newsletters to voucher families with children showcasing neighborhoods or apartment listings in neighborhoods with high-quality school districts.

While simple, straightforward solutions such as those listed above may be the easiest and cheapest to implement and duplicate, local innovation, adaptability, and bottom-up solutions are of the utmost importance and should also be encouraged in future rental housing research. The

challenge to foundations and governments is to foster local innovation that creates strategies that are can be scaled up and used elsewhere.

5) Encourage a Provocative Strategy with the Potential for Big Impacts

While simple, quick, cheap fixes may be easiest to test and bring to scale nationwide, this should not mean that more complicated solutions should be avoided in all cases. Big, bold, provocative interventions that have promise for significant impacts and that captivate the imagination may be wholly worthwhile in the attention that they bring to the issue of housing policy and their potential for more transformative effects.

Opportunity NYC was given as an example of such a compelling strategy. Opportunity NYC offers cash transfers to the poor for completing specific activities related to education, health and workforce participation and training. It has been getting widespread press and brought new attention to the issue of urban poverty, possibly out of hope that a bold new type of strategy never before tried will have a more significant affect on reducing poverty.

Thus ideas which hold the potential for large-scale change and widespread interest beyond housing circles should be encouraged and considered candidates for future funding. It is feasible that funding organizations could stimulate this out-of-the-box thinking by specifically awarding grants through a competitive process to identify and develop such bolder ideas.

6) Have a Long-Term Timeframe

Past research has shown that many impacts take a long time to manifest themselves. One should not that assume that lack of any short-term impacts means lack of any impact down the road. This is especially true for mobility interventions that often work indirectly by improving neighborhood amenities, access, and conditions but do so in the context of moves, which are often at least initially disruptive. In addition, moves change neighborhood conditions for the better for many who have lived all or most of their lives under much worse conditions. Many participants pointed out that reversing the exposure may take time to have an effect. There has also been relatively little follow-up on post-intervention outcomes of movers or those leaving housing assistance as to additional moves, subsequent service needs, or potential returns back into assisted housing.

Without a long-term timeframe built into the evaluation, lack of short-term impacts may be mistaken for lack of any impacts. Past studies have shown that employment services interventions, for example, have taken years to manifest income improvements given the training and work experience that needs to be built, while mobility studies may take many different levels of adjustment to new neighborhoods, jobs, schools, etc., before an effect is manifest.

Foundations should consider funding longitudinal studies even though they are costly and take time to produce findings. One example study could extend the tracking of Welfare to Work family earnings and employment outcomes to determine if the past progression from negative impacts over the short term to insignificant impacts after 3.5 years of follow-up continues with positive long-term impacts in the future. Another is to test for a broad spectrum of potential impacts over time of mobility programs on rental aid recipients and their children.

7) Collect Data that Has Many Potential Uses

Several guidelines for data collection were discussed at the meeting. At a minimum, research should collect data that may directly answer a specific research question such as “do flat rents increase earned income of residents.” Research should also gather data that has the potential for multiple uses beyond any one study, like answering parallel research questions such as “do flat rents decrease unemployment of residents.”

One example of a study that is not experimental but would lead to useful data for several future mobility studies would survey tenants’ to determine their own perceptions of their needs and the choices and constraints they face in their decisions of where to live and work. Time and time again, participants noted that far too little effort is expended gathering information on the behaviors, attitudes, and views of the recipients of rental assistance. Repeatedly, people discussed the need for research that would foster a client-centered approach to serving rental aid recipients and designing experiments that overcome real or perceived constraints to better social and economic outcomes for these recipients.

8) Utilize Opportunities for Key Non-Experimental Research

While experimentally designed research programs are the only way to isolate treatment impacts in a conclusive way, given the lack of resources for new programs, studies that leverage the existing infrastructure of programs, services, and the mountains of data already collected by

housing authorities and other housing groups could also provide a wealth of beneficial information on resident outcomes.

Large amounts of data have been collected by housing providers over the years. HUD requires PHAs and private owners of Section 8 projects to report to central databases extensive information on the occupants of each housing unit in the voucher, public housing, and Section 8 programs. Reporting rates and data quality are good (and, for some subsets of the data, excellent), and HUD's research office for several years has made available to external researchers (with appropriate safeguards to protect household privacy) extracts of those data for research on the characteristics of assisted households and the dynamics of the use of assisted housing. Annual data include census tract identifiers, can be linked longitudinally, and can be linked to property-level datasets for the Section 8 and public housing programs. This is a very rich dataset for non-experimental analysis of the use and effects of housing assistance.

New methods of data collection and assembly hold great promise for obtaining highly useful non-experimental data on the impact of housing assistance and resident services on tenant outcomes. For example, the Pangea Foundation has been working with the American Association of Service Coordinators (AASC), Enterprise Community Partners, NeighborWorks America and others to design an online system that provides a common template for family service providers to collect and track tenant information including tenant services used as well as economic and social outcomes. The original system was developed by Pangea and AASC for tracking outcomes for seniors. There are now more than 100,000 units of senior housing being tracked under AASC Online. The newer online family system, discussed in more detail below, is being developed under the name 'AASC Families,' and has around 25,000 units covered by the system. AASC families is a tool that will be able to be used as both a management program and an outcomes-tracking program from which researchers may in the future aggregate data regionally or nationally across users on an anonymous basis. These data will enable future research on the impact of resident services on the personal asset outcomes of people in family properties. Foundations should consider funding further design of this tool and future research to explore this dataset.

HUD also collects a dataset on the Low Income Housing Tax Credit. This dataset provides property-level characteristics, such as number of units, distribution of unit sizes (by number of bedrooms), whether the property was newly constructed or rehabilitated at the time it was

subsidized by LIHTC, and its geographical coordinates. A major weakness of this dataset for policy research is that it does not include information on the property's occupants or on assisted housing subsidies (vouchers, Section 8) used in or attached to the units. Legislation currently moving through Congress would mandate the creation of a dataset showing the income, demographic, and racial/ethnic characteristics of LIHTC residents. This would be a critical resource for research on the results of subsidized rental housing, both non-experimental research and—potentially—quasi-experimental research using LIHTC properties as the sites of policy interventions. Support for such research and the legislation enabling it should be considered by foundations looking to gain further knowledge of the impact of this program on resident outcomes.

The potential for mining the wealth of data is huge, and underscores the fact that much can be still be learned from non-experimental programs. There should be an emphasis on collection of data and improving access to large datasets that collect information that may possibly be used for future productive studies.

Other Findings

Aside from the 8 principles, the participants at the meeting suggested several promising experiments. Of these, we list below those that seemed to have the most support among those assembled. This research may be divided into three categories, experimental research on self-sufficiency, experimental research on mobility, and non-experimental research themes.

1. Key Experimental Research on Self-Sufficiency

A) Test the impact of rent reforms, such as flat rents, on resident earnings and work effort.

There was near consensus among the participants that if there was one thing that could be tested in the domain of housing and self-sufficiency, it should be the effects of rent reform by itself on labor market outcomes. Rent reform experiments such as flat rents or tiered rents would be simple, easy to implement and easy to explain with the promise to increase a resident's incentive to work and earn more by taking away the concern that earnings would be 'confiscated' by a higher rent. The fact that rent reforms could be done quickly at scale are a major part of their appeal, along with the fact that the idea has been floating around for so long and there still is little evidence on its effect.

There was disagreement as to whether such research should focus on the section 8 voucher program or on the public housing program, as both are large programs that will likely be around for a while. Negatives for using section 8 vouchers include complexities such as utility allowances and landlord relationship issues. Negatives for PHA sites include PHA cultural opposition, ethics of experimenting in PHAs, and the flux of the stock of public housing itself given HOPE VI and other factors causing the supply to change. Others suggested doing both and comparing PHA vs. voucher effects.

B) Test the impact of rent-rule incentives plus services, isolating single vs. layered treatments.

While treatments that incorporate both rent rule work incentives such as flat rents (with a safety net for low incomes) plus services were seen as most desirable, evaluation should allow for the ability to determine the relative impact of these treatments on resident employment and earnings outcomes. For instance, just as MTO was designed to have two treatment groups to compare the impact of vouchers plus relocation services to that of vouchers without services, a future rent-rule program could be designed with test groups receiving flat rents plus intensive employment services, flat rents alone, intensive employment services alone, and measure them against a control group receiving the status quo. The impact on each type of service could help inform policymakers on the most effective type of treatment for improving resident work outcomes, as well as which type of treatment may work best for certain sub-groups of residents.

Additional disagreement should the experiment include employment assistance was whether or not to filter treatments to those most likely to benefit: e.g. whether to help the most helpable vs. those most in need. Opposition was in the poor record of past attempts to identify employment-readiness or willingness, but there was agreement to target incentives to those that will use them, and allocate resources commensurate to need.

C) Test the impact of escrow account incentives plus services, isolating single vs. layered treatments.

As an alternative to testing rent-rule changes with and without employment services, families could be given additional incentive to work and build assets through an escrow account that collects any rent increases and therefore grows as families' incomes grow. Such a program would be similar to FSS but with a research design and would have multiple benefits: families

always pay a rent they can afford; families get used to paying higher rents as their incomes go up; they build assets which they can use for homeownership, advanced education and other benefits; and the escrow can be conditioned on families leaving assisted housing if that is desired, creating a feeling of moving through the system.

D) Test the impact of simply marketing the value of work.

Testing the impact of simply marketing the value of additional work was described as a potentially cost-effective way to increase participation in the many existing programs and treatments already available to assisted housing residents. Such an initiative could showcase these programs and their benefits, as well as the rules and requirements and who to contact for more information. It could also spell out the implications of additional work and earned income, which may assuage some unnecessary fears that may be keeping residents from working more.

E) Test the impact of work requirements or time-limitations attached to receiving housing assistance – but only in voluntary programs so as not to hurt the most vulnerable.

While the idea of testing the impact of rent-rule reforms gained near unanimous support among participants, testing the impact of attaching work requirements or time limits to receipt of housing assistance was much more controversial and garnered much disagreement among participants. A major concern about work requirements is that many of the unemployed or minimally employed receiving housing assistance who do not work do so because they are unable to work for a variety of ailments or limitations beyond their control. Attaching work requirements or time limitations to housing assistance would risk further disadvantaging or excluding the most disadvantaged, those for whom housing assistance is doing the most good and best serving its purpose. However, we still do not know whether such provisions have any impact at all, yet they keep being discussed in political arenas, and some large PHAs (including Atlanta and Chicago) have already begun to use them. Therefore, research needs to catch up and provide information about the impacts—positive and negative—of such requirements. To learn more about the impact of these provisions on work outcomes without disenfranchising the most vulnerable, there was wider agreement among participants that such testing should be through voluntary programs where additional subsidies or benefits are provided on top of the baseline housing assistance currently in place. Such as was the case in the Family Self- Sufficiency

program or the Gateway Families Program, where asset-building incentives required certain work efforts from participants. There are still many complications to resolve, as this would impose a limitation on the scope of the research and findings, and would also be a disincentive for volunteers for future such programs, especially if such provisions would be tested alone, meaning that a volunteer would run the risk of being entered into a comparison group that receives none of the incentives but does face the work-requirement or time-limitation.

2. Key Experimental Research on Mobility

A) Test which strategies are most effective for getting voucher recipients into ‘better’ neighborhoods, however defined.

Past mobility programs have not been able to relocate all participants into targeted neighborhoods, and many participating families who were willing to relocate were either unable to use their vouchers at all or were unable to use them in the desired neighborhoods. Mobility programs must get better at relocating participants into the right neighborhoods. Different strategies for relocation should be tested. One strategy debated at the meeting was the use of location restrictions in mobility programs. At question was whether programs that require moves to certain neighborhoods lead to more moves to better neighborhoods than those that give similar guidance without the requirement? What if, instead of a required, take-it-or-leave-it, neighborhood there was a default neighborhood with the target characteristics and it was up to the resident to opt-out of it? There was disagreement on whether or not there were ethical problems in requiring vouchers be used in certain neighborhoods. The question could be framed as the following: Are location restrictions unfairly restricting choices or are they a necessary ‘push’ into unfamiliar, but potentially beneficial, territory. Foundations should consider studies that test different relocation strategies to find more effective ways to help more families move into good neighborhoods with fewer unused vouchers and fewer vouchers used in undesirable locations.

B) Test the potential of vouchers to improve school outcomes by enabling children attending poorly performing schools to move to neighborhoods served by high performing schools.

Described in further detail above, a targeted relocation intervention based on improving school quality was seen as a creative and thoughtful approach to help families use the flexibility of a housing choice voucher to access better schools, given the link between neighborhood quality and school quality and the links between residency and school district boundaries. Also, since many families who relocated through the MTO program did not move into a new school district, this opportunity and the potential impact on the children's education has not yet been directly tested.

C) Test the effect of private transportation assistance.

Areas with good schools and amenities and low poverty rates often have a poor transit infrastructure, while families in assisted housing have fewer cars and are much more dependent on transit than other residents of these areas. In the in-depth interviews conducted in the final welfare to work voucher program evaluation, lack of transportation was widely cited as a barrier to obtaining and keeping employment. Even in areas with extensive public transportation systems, cars offered several necessary benefits, such as the flexibility needed to get to work on time and efficiently and the ability to drop children off with care providers and pick them up quickly in the event of illness or other emergency. Adding private transportation assistance would address a major barrier for families choosing to relocate, especially into suburban locations. One example of the type of low income car ownership program that may be paired with future housing mobility initiatives is "Vehicles for Change" in Baltimore, which provides low-cost used cars and financing to low-income residents.

D) Test the impact of continuing, post-move counseling and second-move relocation services for residents in their new community.

After their first counseled moves to low-poverty neighborhoods, many families in Moving to Opportunities made secondary moves, and a significant number of these moves were back to high-poverty neighborhoods. There are many reasons families made secondary moves back to higher-poverty neighborhoods, including the lack of relocation assistance in making this move, lack of services or amenities (or access to services and amenities) in low-poverty

neighborhoods, and problems with landlords that made tenants want to leave on short notice. Continued relocation assistance may help families remain in better neighborhoods, which may enable them to sustain any related outcome improvements that may not manifest themselves for several years. Additionally, evaluations have also shown voucher families without counseling progressed into better neighborhoods on their own, but after several moves. Ongoing relocation counseling may help these families find and move to better housing or neighborhoods faster and with fewer moves. Foundations should therefore consider funding research that addresses the ongoing needs of relocated families, which would also shed light on the challenges, constraints, barriers, and overall needs that confront families that move from distressed neighborhoods into targeted areas, and the factors that weigh into their making subsequent moves.

E) Test the impact of mobility plus employment services on resident outcomes.

‘Housing-plus’ interventions in the past have been targeted towards either self-sufficiency enhancing or mobility improving treatments. As the Welfare to Work Voucher program tried to prove, there is potential in targeting both employment and mobility goals at once, but contrary to the original intention of the program, evaluators concluded that the employment support element never materialized in WTW and that the intended restriction of the program to families needing to move for employment reasons was also weak, making it another mobility-only intervention. Other past evaluations of mobility programs have looked for, but seen little if any positive effects on work outcomes, but given the lack of targeted employment supports this does not mean that mobility programs cannot also include employment supports to a positive end. Similarly, self-sufficiency programs can also test the impact of adding mobility treatments to existing self-sufficiency programs. With such vast potential in combining the beneficial aspects of targeted mobility treatments with those of targeted self-sufficiency interventions, foundations should consider funding research exploring the intersection of mobility and self-sufficiency programs.

3. Key Non-Experimental Research

Aside from ideas for experimental research, principal thrusts for non-experimental research were raised as especially important and potentially fruitful.

A) Promote the development and use of provider-based data collection systems.

As important as policy experiments may be, there are enormous opportunities to collect more information on housing and social service recipients at low-cost, in a consistent format, and over time, by funding select, standardized provider-based data collection systems. Housing agencies, resident service coordinators, and others have routine and regular interaction with clients. They have also been required to collect and report a wealth of resident data to HUD, dating back many years, and are increasingly called to report data to public housing authorities and state housing finance agencies. Additional tools and initiatives to collect and track provider data would not only help providers themselves, but would also provide a broad base of data from which to conduct future rental policy research, including much-needed longitudinal studies of assisted housing residents over time.³

An example of this is the effort underway by the American Association of Service Coordinators. With the support of Enterprise Community Partners (ECP), NeighborWorks America (NW), and the involvement of nonprofits from NW, ECP, the Housing Partnership Network, and Stewards of Affordable Housing for the Future, this effort is aimed at collecting and tracking information about the impact of resident services on the personal asset outcomes of people in family properties. Using an online system, it covers things like school attendance, promotion to the next grade, improvement in academic grades, educational attainment, workforce training and employment and wages, health insurance, and credit scores. As an online system with common outcomes in the system, AASC Families creates a “data warehouse” possibly for national and consistent data. If certain personal asset data become routine in the annual lease renewal/income certification process, AASC families could be used to not only track those resident using services, but to track year over year changes for all residents in the property. In addition, there are already existing databases that could be analyzed in greater detail, such as the HOPE VI panel study, the Moving to Opportunity survey with the upcoming 10-year follow up survey, the Welfare to Work Voucher follow-up surveys, and the Welfare Reform and Children in Three Cities Study, and The Study of Income and Program Participation.

³ See Lubell, J. 2008. “Strengthening Resident Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency and Homeownership through Rent Reform Linked to Asset-Building” Washington, DC: National Housing Conference.

B) Identify factors at play in resident moving decisions and constraints to housing choice.

Future rental housing policy must be better informed on the choices and constraints faced by low-income of different backgrounds (gender, racial, ethnic, age, and family type) in finding housing so that these issues may be better addressed. Very little is known about the relative weights families give to factors of cost, family ties, school quality, safety, and access to employment in making their moving decisions. An example of a specific choice offered by a few of the participants, about which little is known, is the decision to move out of housing assistance. Foundations could consider funding research that explores why these moves take place, whether outcomes are positive, how many of these households filter back into assisted housing or try to by getting back on waiting lists, and under what circumstances. Such knowledge could benefit rental housing policy, possibly by helping housing authorities reduce the number of families that lose and then cycle back into assisted housing, and possibly also providing guidance for the kinds of treatments future self-sufficiency and mobility programs can offer to keep families from needing to cycle back into assisted housing. Bottom-up solutions and those guided by surveys and input from residents who have participated in past programs are crucial.

A related topic is the barriers that section 8 families encounter after having made their moving decisions. These are the barriers that families hit that keep them from using their vouchers in good neighborhoods and, in some cases, from using their vouchers at all. An example of such a barrier mentioned at the meeting is the ability of landlords to reject Section 8 residents outright, which is still legal in most states. This may lead to different housing and neighborhood characteristics for voucher users and potentially lower voucher utilization rates in these states. It could be a form of masked racial discrimination based on the high share of minority families in the housing voucher program. Research on these barriers could have significant impact on federal rental housing policy and foundations should consider supporting it.

C) Foster a business-client relationship between PHAs and residents.

Even after years of research and policy, researchers and policymakers know relatively little about how rental aid recipients and those eligible for rental assistance but do not receive it make the choices they do and what their attitudes and views are about housing. Programs that help foster the business-client relationship between authorities and their tenants, that help PHAs develop marketable solutions to client needs (clear, simple choices are best for both sides), and

that increase transparency and simplicity of rent rules are much desired. Equally desirable is research on the nature of the PHA/tenant relationship specifically in the ability of PHAs to meet the needs of tenants and the means they use to do so. Housing authorities will be most effective in administering rules that are clearly explained, understood, and administered, with a focus on outcomes, not subgroups and a menu of programs and services.

D) Further use of the Welfare to Work Voucher sample for non-experimental research.

Unfortunately, various limitations hinder the ability to use the Welfare to Work Voucher sample for further experimental research according to the original design, for as time passes, higher and higher percentages of families in the program's control group eventually get to the top of the waiting list and receive a voucher, thereby eliminating their ability to serve as a control.⁴ However, data from the sample could still be very useful for additional *non-experimental* research. The sample could continue to be tracked and used to explore some very interesting issues, such as why families who use vouchers give them up (without having income increases that make the subsidy unnecessary) and with what results.

E) Explore research opportunities within the LIHTC program.

The LIHTC program differs from public or voucher housing in both the amount of subsidy and the types of people served. However, LIHTC has untapped potential for quasi-experimental research on the impact of flat rents within the program itself if it were to compare otherwise similar residents within LIHTC properties who have vouchers (or project-based Section 8) with those who are charged flat LIHTC rents or, alternatively, quasi-experimental research comparing residents of different LIHTC developments. Or LIHTC properties might also be used for interventions with comparison sites, along the lines of Jobs Plus. Intermediaries such as LISC, Enterprise, and NeighborWorks could be used to recruit non-profit owners of LIHTC developments to participate in such experiments to include only those providers with a willingness to cooperate with program requirements.

⁴ This "crossover" between control and treatment groups occurred to a limited degree during the WTWV program evaluation time period as well, but statistical adjustments were made within the HUD research project's final report to get around the problem.

F) Explore the HOPE VI program for impacts of income mixing on employment outcomes.

Past research on HOPE VI has explored the effect of income mixing within subsidized rental developments or groups of developments on the self-sufficiency and well-being of the low-income residents of such communities, but only in a limited and qualitative way. The time has come to revisit HOPE VI developments placed in serve 5 to 10 years ago and to measure by person-level and community-level results. A similar research agenda could apply to rental housing subsidized by LIHTC (and not part of the HOPE VI program) that has created mixed income housing because of the way in which LIHTC rents work and because of the use of vouchers in some of the units in particular LIHTC developments.⁵

Conclusion

In all, the day-long discussion about research on demand-side rental policies and programs was rich. The participants (list attached) discussed and debated issues with passion and a spirit of collegiality. This summary is an attempt to faithfully capture the takeaways from the conversation. The Joint Center would especially like to thank Erika Poethig of the MacArthur Foundation for insights and ideas on how to structure the event. The Joint Center also owes a debt of gratitude to the discussants and moderators that participated, and especially to James Riccio, Margery Turner, Jeff Lubell, and Jill Khadduri for their help in planning the event.

⁵ Some mixed-income LIHTC developments may be former project-based Section 8 developments that have “opted out” of the program.