

Deconcentration without Integration: Examining the Social Outcomes of Housing Choice Voucher Movement in Los Angeles County

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This article reports on the social experiences of tenants moving from low-income neighborhoods in the City of Los Angeles to a racially mixed, lower poverty suburb—the Antelope Valley—using Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers. Voucher tenants experience significant social exclusion and aggressive oversight. Local residents use racial shorthand to label their black neighbors as voucher holders and apply additional scrutiny to their activity. They aggressively report voucher tenants to the housing authority and police, instigating inspections that threaten tenants' voucher status. Tenants react to these circumstances by withdrawing from their communities in order to avoid scrutiny and protect their status in the program. These findings illustrate that the social difficulties documented in mixed-income developments may also exist in voucher programs, highlight the ways in which neighborhood effects may be extended to include social experiences, and suggest the limits of the voucher program to translate geographic mobility into socioeconomic progress.

INTRODUCTION

The Antelope Valley, the northernmost region of Los Angeles County, has recently become one of the principal destinations for tenants using Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher to secure affordable housing. The ongoing shift in federal housing policy away from public housing and toward poverty deconcentration (Orlebeke 2010; Vale and Freemark 2012) has prompted the development of new forms of housing assistance that include the voucher program. The voucher program provides tenants with a housing subsidy paid by the federal government to their landlords. Although the voucher can be used to secure housing anywhere, the system as it currently operates tends to facilitate the movement of voucher tenants out of urban areas and into a wider range of new neighborhoods that includes distressed suburbs like the Antelope Valley (Covington et al. 2011). This study contributes to the literature on poverty deconcentration by highlighting the conditions and processes that may serve as barriers to social and economic integration in new communities. It does so by tracing how voucher tenants are identified by an association of race and voucher status, enabling hostile neighbors to monitor and intimidate them and forcing them to isolate themselves as a means of self-protection. These findings

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can thus be read as both an expounding of the social dimensions of neighborhood effects and an examination of processes that may stifle voucher success.

The established literature on neighborhood effects has given greater attention to economic, health, criminal, and educational outcomes than it has to the social changes that might accompany movement between dissimilar neighborhoods. But there are strong reasons to consider social changes experienced by tenants moving between neighborhood contexts as a subject of study that is vital to a full understanding of the consequences of voucher programs. First, as Briggs (1998) argues, social integration may be a vital process that allows movers to gain stability and economic mobility in new communities. Second, recent research on the social experiences of tenants in the voucher program's counterpart, mixed-income developments, shows that low-income tenants moving between programs can and often do experience serious social challenges that affect their ability to integrate into new circumstances (Khare et al. 2015). Third, the racial dimension of the voucher program suggests an ongoing responsibility to consider how racial dynamics might shape the experiences of voucher tenants as they enter new, unfamiliar, and even potentially hostile communities.

A comparison of the social experiences of tenants in both voucher and mixed-income programs can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the consequences of the shift from traditional public housing to the new mixed-income/voucher schemes. And studying the social experiences of voucher tenants is important because the voucher program is large and growing,¹ because it is potentially less conducive to stigma than its mixed-income counterpart, and because the social integration of tenants may be an intermediate step between leaving a neighborhood with concentrated poverty and realizing economic gains.

I analyze the social experiences of voucher tenants through interviews of Section 8 voucher recipients who have moved to the Antelope Valley—until recently, a predominantly white and middle class area. Once dominated by the aerospace industry and populated by that industry's white professionals, the Antelope Valley has undergone three major changes in the recent past. The first trend is the long-term economic and demographic diversification of the region as the aerospace industry has ceased being the overwhelming presence in the region's economy. The second major trend is the region's overall growth—the cities of the Antelope Valley grew by roughly 30 percent between 2000 and 2010. The third major trend is the foreclosure crisis, which hit this suburban region particularly hard. Reporting by Schlesinger (2012) indicated that roughly 18 percent of foreclosures in the County were located in the Antelope Valley and that property values halved during the Great Recession.

Today, minorities constitute just over half of the Antelope Valley's population. Los Angeles County Housing Choice Voucher tenants have been a part of this demographic shift, moving in large enough numbers that the Antelope Valley is now considered the main destination for voucher tenants. The Antelope Valley has no public housing but does have a relatively small and recently developed stock of affordable housing, meaning that most of the tenants living in the region who use federal housing support do so through the voucher program. Voucher movement in the Antelope Valley fits broader trends of voucher suburbanization and clustering, including those observed in economically and racially segregated neighborhoods and neighborhoods affected by foreclosures (Covington et al. 2011; Metzger 2014; Pendall 2000; Pfeiffer and Lucio 2015; Wang and Varady 2005).

Because one of the main motivations to study voucher experiences is the shift in federal policy from public housing to vouchers, I complement an examination of vouchers with interviews of individuals in Los Angeles public housing. Interviews with public housing tenants provide a sense of the plausible alternate experiences that voucher tenants might have had, had vouchers not replaced much of traditional public housing. I focus these interviews in Westmont, a neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles that typifies the neighborhoods that voucher tenants report having lived in prior to joining the voucher program.

BACKGROUND

The federal government's long-term shift from large public housing developments in the inner city to policies such as tax credits, mixed-income redevelopments, and voucher certificates is the broader social policy that has produced voucher movement to the Antelope Valley (Crump 2002; Orlebeke 2010; Vale and Freemark 2012; Winnick 1995). Although the origin of vouchers as a replacement for public housing dates to the 1960s (Gill 2012), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)'s 1993 HOPE VI reforms are considered the primary turning point in the formation of today's housing policy. These reforms, which are often considered a type of poverty deconcentration, emerged out of a growing concern with the negative effects of concentrated poverty on low-income families (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1997; Wilson 1987, 1996;). In that vein, the voucher system facilitates movement out of areas of concentrated poverty by exposing tenants to increased economic opportunities and reduced disadvantages, thereby facilitating a transition to the middle class (Schmoke 2010).

REVIEWING EXISTING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF VOUCHER MOVEMENT

Despite high expectations based on the promising results of the Gautreaux project (Cisneros and Engdahl 2010; Keels et al. 2005; Polikoff 2007; Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum 2002), and ongoing evidence that well-implemented dispersal programs can be of tremendous benefit to tenants (Massey et al. 2013), studies of housing vouchers have shown mixed outcomes. Although tenants experienced many salutary changes to their neighborhood conditions (Goering 2003), these changes were not always positive or uniform by race (Basolo 2015; Basolo and Nguyen 2005). While movers did experience improved mental health and less exposure to crime, researchers found little change in participants' economic status as measured by earnings and welfare usage (Goering 2003; Katz et al. 2001; Kling et al. 2007; Ludwig et al., 2008). Results for children did appear more positive (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Children whose families moved to low-poverty neighborhoods through the Moving to Opportunity experiment (MTO) grew up to have significantly higher annual incomes than their counterparts in the experiment's control group, a trend possibly explained by their prolonged exposure to the treatment of a lower poverty neighborhood (Chetty et al. 2015). Thus while movement often did enable tenants to reach better housing and neighborhoods, the lack of evidence for economic improvement contradicts expectations that dispersal itself could undo the negative results of concentrated poverty.

Although some researchers pointed to the design flaws of the MTO experiment (Clampet-Lundquist and Massey 2008), a growing body of research points to the role of broader social structures in limiting the mobility and life conditions of individuals in conditions of concentrated poverty. Sampson (2008) argued that MTO's desegregation mechanism was unable to overcome Chicago's social structure—tenants merely moved to neighborhoods that were economically and racially very similar to their prior residences. Much subsequent research supports this view. Landlords often work to avoid voucher tenants (Rosen 2014; Teater 2011). Voucher tenants continue to make residential location decisions that balance trade-offs between factors such as poverty rates, crime, and access to transportation against factors such as housing cost, quality, and space (Blumenberg and Pierce 2014; Ruel et al. 2013; Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012). These factors contribute to the ongoing economic and racial segregation of voucher users (Metzger 2014; Varady 2010). While many voucher movers have difficulty moving out of cities and into suburbs, those that do move to suburbs also experience differences by race—blacks tend to move to higher poverty suburban tracts than whites do (DeLuca et al. 2013). And among tenants who were able to successfully move to low poverty neighborhoods, many eventually made second or third moves into neighborhoods that were in worse economic positions (Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012).

This evidence of the voucher program's limited effect has contributed to a growing perception that poverty deconcentration functions as a distraction from fundamental causes of urban inequality. Deconcentration's most tangible effect might be that it has enabled the large-scale reorganization of federal housing policy which has reduced public housing, moved its tenants out of important urban real-estate, and facilitated redevelopment and gentrification (Goetz 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014; Joseph 2013; Sharkey 2015, Vale 2013; Vale and Freemark 2012; Venkatesh 2013). With increasing hindsight, many voucher researchers advocate rethinking the assumptions behind poverty deconcentration (Khadhuri 2001) and finding new ways to address issues of concentrated poverty (Popkin et al. 2000; Popkin et al. 2009; Sharkey 2015).

Voucher movement across Los Angeles County likely reflects many of the limitations documented in prior research. However, while the established literature focuses on the economic circumstances, geographic distributions, and housing conditions of voucher tenants, we know comparatively little about tenants' social experiences.

WHY STUDY SOCIAL EXPERIENCES? USING MIXED-INCOME CONTEXTS AS A BASIS FOR COMPARISON

Wilson (1987) argued that concentrated poverty created forms of social isolation that exacerbated the economic disadvantages already affecting residents of poor communities. As a corollary, Briggs (1998) has argued that various forms of social capital are crucial to enabling voucher movers to capitalize on the new opportunities available to them in lower poverty neighborhoods. Tenants' social capital can help them simply survive on a day-to-day basis (what Briggs calls social support) or can allow them to gain access to better job or other economic opportunities (what Briggs calls social leverage). Clampet-Lundquist (2010) documents the destabilizing effect of public housing relocation on the strength of individuals' local social ties as well as their feelings of safety and control. In a

similar vein, social capital can be thought of as a possible bridge between movement and economic progress.

Recent studies of the social experiences of tenants in mixed-income developments show that even after moving out of traditional public housing, tenants can still be socially excluded and stigmatized by their neighbors and communities (Fraser et al. 2012; McCormick et al. 2012). Two critical studies (one inside and one outside a mixed development) bear further investigation and can serve as a basis for comparison with findings in the voucher program.

In the first setting, McCormick et al. (2012) interview tenants transitioning from large projects to mixed-income sites in order to gauge their social experiences. While the mixed-income format is designed to reduce the level of stigmatization experienced by tenants,² the authors instead discover that while some modes of stigmatization have reduced (they no longer feel associated with poor housing quality and poor surrounding conditions), other forms of economic and racial stigma have emerged to produce strong feelings of isolation. These forms of stigma include demeaning and invasive screening of tenants prior to residency and constant and intrusive forms of monitoring (through cameras in buildings) and rule-making that spans from enforced cleanliness in units to racialized behavioral restrictions on noise, the size of gatherings, and one's ability to barbeque.³ As the authors describe, these rules largely do not apply to private tenants and serve to make public tenants feel as though they are constantly under surveillance and in danger of violating a rule. Although the program is supposed to erase public-private distinctions inside the developments, private tenants assume that their black neighbors are using federal support. Finally, the looming possibility of eviction implicitly enforces behavioral expectations, a particularly effective threat given the scarcity of available public or affordable housing. These dynamics undermine the program and produce social traumas for many tenants.

In the second setting, Fraser et al. (2012) observe how individuals who live around public mixed-income developments understand and interact with those tenants. Through interviews with neighbors living in communities directly adjacent to a mixed-income development, the authors discover a deep and self-perpetuating pattern of resentment and discrimination toward tenants in the mixed-income development. These tenants construct a binary based on race and socioeconomic status, thinking of their subsidized and largely minority neighbors as a homogenous and different population. Neighbors build narratives that define their public counterparts as violent, poorly behaved, lazy, and criminal. They then construct themselves as a community defined by not sharing the deficiencies of their publicly supported counterparts. Neighbors use these stereotypes to justify support for external monitoring, enforcement, and behavioral modification.⁴

These studies show that mixed-income developments affect tenants in more than just economic ways, and in some cases produce social difficulties for their participants.⁵ Although living in mixed developments is not looked at with the same public scrutiny as the projects, tenants continue to experience a hostile climate within and outside their residences. These findings complicate the theoretical basis for poverty deconcentration through the HOPE VI agenda, indicating that hostility to subsidized minority tenants may undermine or forestall any predicted social and economic gains. These findings provide important motivation to study the voucher program's social consequences.

COMPARING ADVANTAGES OF VOUCHERS AND MIXED-INCOME DEVELOPMENTS

There are some reasons to believe that vouchers are inferior to mixed-income developments when considering their capacity to promote social integration. Mixed-income developments can be sited in a planned and conscientious manner, they can be managed in a more intentional way, and their composition requirements can help prevent extreme reconcentrations of low-income tenants. Vouchers, in comparison, have less direct administration and have fewer restrictions on their location. Comparatively little can be done to ensure that voucher tenants are integrated in their new surroundings. This hands-off approach introduces more variation in the possibilities for voucher movement—the benefits of additional spread can just as easily be counterbalanced by movement into economically struggling neighborhoods, concentration in distressed pockets, or increased distance from social services, community support, and public transportation.

Yet other features of these programs suggest that vouchers may do a superior job of ensuring tenant privacy. Whereas tenants in mixed-income settings can easily lose their privacy, the voucher program's reliance on privately built and owned units may make it more difficult to distinguish voucher housing from other private housing. Only program administrators, landlords, and the tenants themselves would have direct knowledge of a tenant's voucher status. In an ideal scenario, voucher tenants are able to find housing across a wide range of a city's affordable rental units, and are indistinguishable in their homes and apartments from their private counterparts. To the degree that this ideal is able to be reached, there is a reason to expect that voucher tenants would not experience the same types of stigma as mixed-income tenants in other studies have.

DATA AND METHODS

Unlike public housing projects and mixed-income developments, vouchers pose unique challenges to researchers seeking to conduct extended interviews with tenants. Voucher tenants are difficult to locate because of their spread across metropolitan areas and the privacy-related suppression of voucher addresses by housing authorities. Thus, qualitative research on the experiences of voucher users necessitates a site like the Antelope Valley, where the high concentration of Section 8 housing makes it more feasible to locate voucher tenants. I located interview subjects by visiting the Housing Authority of Los Angeles County's main offices. Both new and long-time Section 8 users visit this office regularly to fulfill the program's many administrative requirements, dampening possible selection issues that may arise through this method.

I conducted 18 interviews with tenants who had used Section 8 to move to the Antelope Valley in the past decade, greeting tenants and arranging interviews after they had finished appointments at the housing authority. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour. To ensure a baseline of experiences, all tenants were adults over the age of 18 who had moved to the Antelope Valley using vouchers at least 6 months prior to the interview. I conducted the interviews by phone after arranging them in person, a decision that allowed for more privacy and facilitated longer, more considered conversations.

Although this sample contained a relatively small number of cases, its characteristics fit the Department of Housing and Urban Development's profile of voucher tenants in the Antelope Valley. In person interviews provided a chance to speak to tenants at length and allowed for an exploration of their experiences that has not been covered in prior research on vouchers as implemented in real-world conditions. Questions ranged from demographic and program-related questions to open-ended topics regarding the housing, social, and employment experiences of individuals after moving. Tenants who had children could choose to answer additional questions about their schooling and social experience. Interviews ended with an open-ended period for tenants to discuss additional issues they felt were necessary to properly understanding their situation. These advantages made the in person approach preferable to methods such as a mail survey. In addition to these interviews, I also observed the condition, quality, and size of housing in voucher heavy neighborhoods, which I located through talking to voucher tenants and through publicly available maps of voucher usage in Lancaster (see Figure 2).

Shortcomings of this method include both a smaller sample size and possible selection bias. For example, although voucher holders are compelled to visit the Housing Authority regularly for various administrative requirements, voucher tenants with administrative problems are likely to visit more often than those with more positive experiences. If those administrative problems were distributed nonrandomly among voucher tenants, it may bias the sample and findings. Other factors that might shape the sample include accessibility barriers (such as transportation access), transitions out of the voucher program based on economic success, or evictions or other departures from the program for tenants with poor experiences. It must finally be noted that, in a broader sense, a series of measured (such as access to transportation) and unmeasured (such as motivation and networks) factors may also influence who uses a voucher to move to the Antelope Valley.

In addition to speaking to voucher movers, I sought to contextualize the experiences of these tenants by gaining a sense of what a plausible alternative scenario might look like. Because the voucher is first and foremost part of a policy change by the federal government, and because a substantial number of tenants I interviewed reported having moved from public housing settings into the voucher program, I chose to gain additional context through interviews of public housing tenants in Los Angeles. This is not to say that there are not voucher tenants who arrive at the program from the private market or other arrangements that benefit from local or federal support, and it is not to say that tenants pushed out of public housing might not also go to other programs, the private market, or other parts of the county. But it is fair to say that without the voucher program, many of the tenants I interviewed in the Antelope Valley may very well have resided in public housing in the City of Los Angeles.

I chose the specific public housing locations for interviews based on the information I received from voucher tenants about their origin neighborhoods and public housing settings. I selected a comparison site in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Westmont, which best fits the descriptions of the communities voucher users reported leaving in order to move to the Antelope Valley. In Westmont, I conducted interviews by visiting several county public housing buildings and interviewing heads of households at individual units that I visited. Interviews with nine heads of households covered the same set of topics related to housing satisfaction and economic conditions, with a new set of questions asking tenants to give their opinion of Antelope Valley tenants' commonly stated reasons for

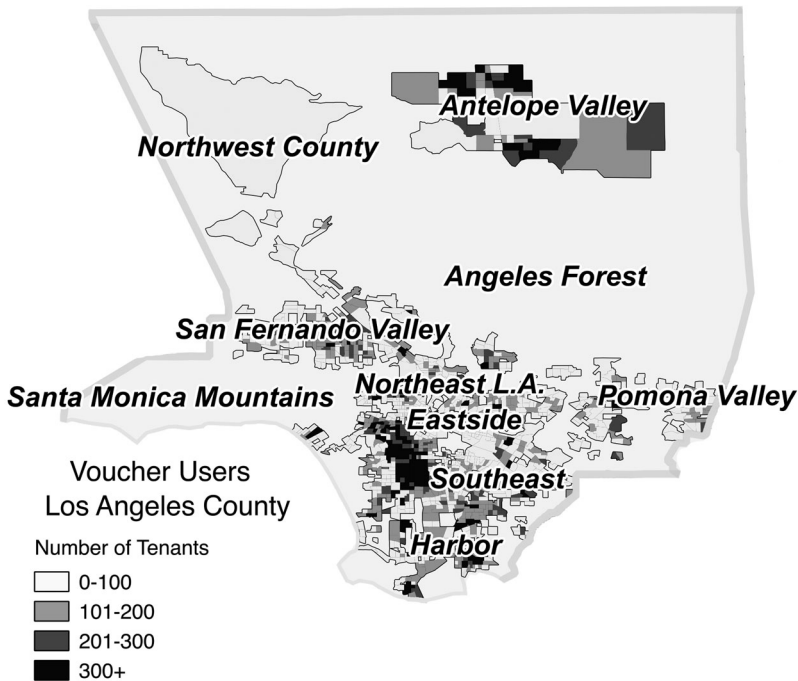


FIG. 1. Distribution of voucher tenants in Los Angeles County census tracts, 2012.
Source: Department of Housing and Urban Development.

moving away. While these data do not allow for causal claims, they do provide important context for the experiences I documented in the Antelope Valley.

DYNAMICS OF VOUCHER MOVEMENT TO THE ANTELOPE VALLEY

SCALE OF MOVEMENT

The number of voucher tenants in the Antelope Valley has roughly doubled in the past decade, growing to 12,216 total individuals and 3,798 housing units in 2012.⁶ Although only 3.1 percent of Los Angeles County's population lives in the Antelope Valley, 14 percent of its voucher population now resides there. Similarly, voucher tenants make up 3.89 percent of the total population of the Antelope Valley, but only .87 percent of the population of Los Angeles County. Lancaster and Palmdale appear four times in a count of the 10 tracts with the highest voucher counts in the five-county Greater Los Angeles region.

Figure 1 shows a map of Los Angeles County, with indications of voucher counts by tract. As one can see, the Antelope Valley, located in the far north part of LA County, is one of the major voucher locations of the county. It is roughly 70 miles north of the City

of Los Angeles, where most tenants live prior to moving through the voucher program, and where most public housing in the County is located.

As mentioned earlier, the cities making up the Antelope Valley (Lancaster and Palmdale) have become common destinations for Los Angeles voucher recipients over the past decade. One of the underlying reasons for this trend is the way that the program's design interacts with trends in the housing market. Compensation rates for landlords who participate in the voucher program are generally considered generous for low-rent suburbs and miserly for high-rent cities.⁷ Thus, the market tends to produce voucher openings in low-rent, low-demand neighborhoods like those in the Antelope Valley. As Pfeiffer and Lucio (2015) demonstrate, foreclosures can also be a significant factor in growing the supply of voucher-ready units as investors and property owners use the program to fill vacancies, though other research shows that property owners only tend to use vouchers as a last resort (Galster et al. 1999). These factors may explain the Antelope Valley's rapid rise to becoming one of the most prominent voucher destinations in all of Southern California, as it is both cheaper than the expensive central locations of the County (meaning that the reimbursement rate goes farther there than elsewhere) and it is still struggling to recover from the foreclosure crisis.

While explanations for the supply of voucher openings in the Antelope Valley are relatively clear, the reasons that tenants move there are somewhat more complex. Tenants with vouchers can find housing either of two ways—by encouraging a private landlord to opt into the program, or by choosing from housing advertised by landlords who are already part of the voucher program. Tenants in difficult circumstances choose from already-advertised units because this method is significantly faster. In addition, the relatively low cost of units in the Antelope Valley allows voucher holders to maximize other factors that may be important to them—such as housing quality or housing size. For example, voucher tenants with children may be willing to live in a suboptimal location in exchange for a larger home that can better accommodate children. Rosenblatt and DeLuca (2012) provide extensive evidence of how voucher tenants consider these and other trade-offs when making movement decisions.

Besides voucher tenants' own choices, seemingly unrelated aspects of the voucher program, such as the unpredictability of when individuals on a voucher waiting list will be given a voucher or the limited windows of time that tenants can search before making a move, can also influence what types of units new voucher tenants may find or settle for (DeLuca et al. 2013). Finally, tenants who are already in the voucher program may also serve as informal agents channeling new tenants into a familiar destination. Thus, despite the many obvious disadvantages of moving to an area that is far from Los Angeles' employment opportunities and social ties and which may have poor public transportation⁸ and social services, there are still many factors that can lead tenants to move to the Antelope Valley. As Pendall et al. (2015) suggest, voucher holders with access to transportation may be better able to choose housing in more distant suburbs than voucher holders without access to a car.

CONTRADICTIONS OF MOVEMENT

According to the 2010 Census, the racial makeup of the Antelope Valley is roughly 15 percent black and 50 percent white, the inverse of the racial makeup of Westmont.

And while Lancaster and Palmdale's nonweighted average per capita income is \$19,833, Westmont's per capita income is \$14,349. These data suggest that movement between these two neighborhoods might entail a significant change in circumstances for voucher tenants, who may stand to earn significantly higher incomes should they be able to successfully integrate. But while the Antelope Valley may at first appear to be a more prosperous place for voucher tenants, an inspection of the area's economic circumstances by race shows that voucher tenants move into areas that are quite similar to those they left.

Los Angeles County's most prominent case of voucher movement is one in which voucher tenants are moving into an increasingly racially segregated setting, rather than away from that segregation. The nonweighted average of Lancaster and Palmdale's black-wide dissimilarity scores for the Antelope Valley's main cities is 25.85, a figure that has steadily increased since 1990. This figure is a sharp contrast to Westmont's score of 10.66, which, like the score for the City of Los Angeles, has decreased over time. Indeed, my visits to voucher-heavy neighborhoods revealed depressed neighborhoods of clearly diminished housing quality, often near vacant homes or units in disrepair. These observations support a thesis that the voucher program filled housing that might otherwise remain in extremely low demand. The concentration of that poor housing stock also contributes to a pattern of segregation, as can be seen in Figure 2, which shows the distribution of vouchers in Lancaster city. However, despite voucher tenants being concentrated in a smaller set of neighborhoods, they do not account for large fractions of those neighborhoods' residents. As Figure 2 also shows, there are only two neighborhoods in Lancaster in which voucher tenants made up more than 15 percent of the population.

When sorted by race, the economic differences between Westmont and the Antelope Valley disappear. While the Antelope Valley's cities have a per capita income roughly \$6,000 higher than Westmont's, the two areas' black per capita incomes are nearly identical (\$17,531 in the Antelope Valley, \$17,801 in Westmont). This circumstance raises questions about which conditions are most relevant to the experiences of voucher movers—those of the city they move to as a whole, or those of the specific populations that they might be a part of?

When one compares the specific demographic conditions of voucher tenants in the Antelope Valley to public housing tenants in Los Angeles, the same pattern is revealed. By purely economic measures, it is unclear whether voucher tenants are economically better off than tenants in the public housing programs that vouchers were intended to replace. The Department of Housing and Urban Development's *Picture of Subsidized Housing* provides data on the characteristics of Section 8 voucher users in the Antelope Valley as well as public housing tenants in Westmont and Los Angeles City as a whole. Table 1 shows that the average household income for voucher holders in the Antelope Valley's cities is several thousand dollars less than the average household income of public housing tenants in Westmont and the City of Los Angeles (though all these figures are a far cry from the national median household income of \$51,914). Meanwhile, voucher tenants in the Antelope Valley live in tracts with relatively high levels of poverty (roughly 20 percent), but these tracts are still less poor than the tracts in which public housing in Los Angeles is embedded. Thus, while voucher tenants moving to the Antelope Valley may be living in neighborhoods with less poverty than the ones they left, they tend to have lower incomes than their public housing counterparts. It is not immediately apparent

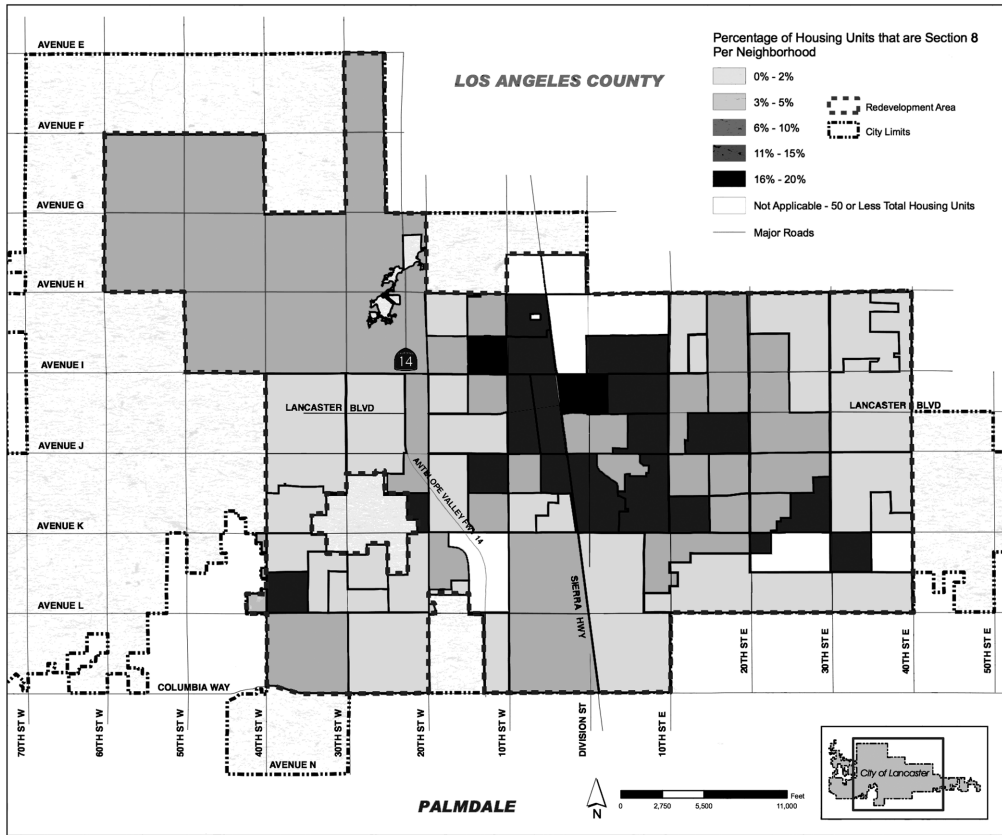


FIG. 2. Concentration of Section 8 Housing in Lancaster (Antelope Valley), 2008.

Source: City of Lancaster

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Antelope Valley Section 8 Users and Westmont Public Housing Tenants, 2008

	Lancaster	Palmdale	Westmont
Percent White	15	13	2
Percent Black	70	67	82
Percent Latino	14	18	16
Average household rent payment (Dollars)	422	412	419
Average household income (Dollars)	15,400	15,500	18,200
Percent Female headed	91	91	95
Percent Female headed, with children	67	69	81
Average years of tenure	6.08	5.83	6.58
People in unit	3.3	3.3	3
Percent in Poverty, surrounding census tract	18	20	35
Percent Minority, surrounding census tract	48	65	99

Source: A Picture of Subsidized Households, 2008. Rent and income in 2008 dollars.

which setting—traditional Los Angeles public housing in a neighborhood like Westmont or voucher units in the Antelope Valley—is more favorable than the other.

FINDINGS

This review of the experiences of voucher tenants in the Antelope Valley proceeds by outlining general characteristics of the sample, their overall social experiences, the experiences of their children, and their labor market outcomes. It then uses case studies to further examine the social dynamics between voucher tenants and neighbors, detailing a process of monitoring and intimidation that causes tenants to adopt a “bunker mentality” of self-protection.

CHARACTERISTICS OF VOUCHER TENANTS INTERVIEWED IN THE ANTELOPE VALLEY

Table 1 shows that the population of Section 8 voucher tenants across Lancaster and Palmdale is roughly 70 percent black, over 90 percent of households are female-headed, and two-thirds of all households are female-headed households with children. Roughly 91 percent of Section 8 households in the Antelope Valley are female-headed, 68 percent of households are female-headed with children, roughly 70 percent of tenants are black, and the average tenure of voucher tenants is roughly 6 years. This is roughly consistent with the data specific to the tenants I interviewed in the Antelope Valley, whose characteristics are described in Table 2 alongside the characteristics of public housing tenants I interviewed in Westmont.

Sixteen of 18 Antelope Valley voucher users in this survey are black (89 percent) and 14 are female (78 percent). These respondents are middle-aged and older, have been residents of the area for multiple years, and are caring for children or grandchildren with the assistance of the housing voucher. Interview subjects in Westmont also largely reflect the broader characteristics of the city’s public housing population, but in comparison to the census tracts surrounding voucher users, the tracts surrounding public housing tenants have higher rates of poverty, a finding that suggests that voucher movement exposes tenants to more affluent circumstances at a wider level. Westmont public housing tenants tend to live with children and other adult family members (only one reported living alone).

Table 2 also shows that Section 8 movers to the Antelope Valley often come to this program from within the county, particularly the City of Los Angeles. A number of factors might help determine their movement, including the supply of easily accessible voucher units, tenant preferences, economic circumstances, and the information available through their networks. For example, several individuals found out about this program through family members and friends, or through administrators of their prior housing assistance programs (such as county public housing), and three out of every four respondents reported knowing others in the Antelope Valley prior to moving. It is often these friends, family, and supportive administrators who help tenants get onto the waiting list and navigate the application.

TABLE 2. Summary Statistics for Respondents in the Antelope Valley and Westmont

	Antelope Valley		Westmont	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Female	14	78	8	89
Black	16	89	9	100
Age				
20–30	0	0	4	44
30–40	5	28	2	22
40–50	7	39	2	22
50+	6	33	1	11
Time in Antelope Valley or Westmont Unit*				
Less than 1 year	2	13	2	22
1–3 years	3	20	1	11
4–10 years	6	40	2	22
10+ years	4	27	3	33
Origin Neighborhood				
Los Angeles City	10	56	8	89
Los Angeles County	4	22	1	11
Outside LA County	4	22	0	0
Living Arrangements**				
Lives Alone	1	6	1	14
With another adult	2	11	0	0
With children only	9	50	3	43
With adult and children	5	28	3	43
Reason for Move to Current Location				
Job/Economic	2	11	3	33
Space	5	28	0	0
Dissatisfied with City	1	6	0	0
Emergency	3	17	4	44
Other	6	33	5	56
Location				
Palmdale resident	8	44	–	–
Lancaster resident	5	28	–	–
Has lived in both Palmdale and Lancaster	4	22	–	–
Knew others in AV before move	12	67	–	–
Option if not Public Housing				
No other option	–	–	6	67
Move in with family	–	–	1	11
Rent privately	–	–	2	22
N	18		9	100

*The number of Antelope Valley respondents for this question is 15.

**The number of Westmont respondents for this question is 7.

When asked why they chose to move, voucher tenants reference dissatisfaction with their current living conditions, family crises, or other emergencies. Respondents explain that violence, gangs, and poor school quality are the factors that drive their dissatisfaction with their prior neighborhoods. Tenants with children report moving to the Antelope Valley in order to provide their children with more stability and safety. Several residents, especially older ones, state that they wanted to provide a stable environment for the children or grandchildren under their care, mentioning desires such as providing their child with their own bedroom or gaining access to a better school system in the

TABLE 3. Satisfaction and Integration of Respondents

	Antelope Valley		South Central	
	N	%	N	%
Had job prior to moving*	13	72	—	—
Currently has job**	13	72	6	67
Feels comfortable	6	33	7	78
Feels welcome	3	17	8	88
Feels safe	11	61	5	28
Gangs are a problem here	—	—	6	67
Schools are a problem	—	—	3	33
Space is a problem	—	—	3	33
Considers self-happy with outcome***	7	38	4	44
N	18		9	

*Sixteen Antelope Valley respondents answered this question, it was not asked of Westmont tenants.

**Fifteen Antelope Valley respondents answered this question.

***Antelope Valley residents were asked whether they were happy in comparison to their prior living arrangement. Westmont residents were asked whether they were happy with their current living situation.

Antelope Valley. Tenants maintain a high rate of employment before and after moving, which may indicate a de facto economic threshold needed to be able to initiate such a move. They did not mention public transportation as a factor in their movement decisions, but this is more likely to be a product of the fact that their decisions were largely based on availability, space, and affordability. Overall, respondents appear to have concluded that moving to the Antelope Valley through the voucher program was a practical way to find better housing, escape a neighborhood, or provide better conditions for their children.

TENANTS' SOCIAL EXPERIENCES

While the effects of moving to the Antelope Valley include greater perceived safety, tenants consistently express a low level of comfort and integration in their new surroundings. Individuals who move to the Antelope Valley often do not feel comfortable there. From Table 3, only 6 of 18 tenants report feeling comfortable in their neighborhoods (33.3 percent), and only 3 of 18 feel welcomed by immediately surrounding neighbors (16.7 percent). Most respondents report negative feelings about their neighbors or the city as a whole. When asked about the environment in the area, Patricia, a middle-aged black tenant explains, "It's just a different environment. When I came up here, people don't speak to you . . . they're really disrespectful. When you do speak to them, they try to figure out why you're speaking to them . . . they treat people however they want to treat them, they talk to them however they want to talk to them." Regardless of their overall satisfaction with their circumstances, nearly every tenant interviewed expressed similar concerns throughout the course of their interviews. Tenants described their new communities as "racist" or "prejudiced," and referred to the people they met as overly "attentive" to them. They described the constant "suspicion" as having created a climate that "made you want to leave." Although it was rare for multiple tenants to describe their conditions in exactly the same manner, the issues raised by tenants throughout their interviews painted a broader picture of social isolation and rejection. Only one tenant did not touch on an

experience of social hostility during the course of the interview. While respondents often do not feel accepted or welcomed by their new communities, it is important to note that 11 of 16 reported feeling safe from crime (68.8 percent).

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES

Ten of the respondents in the sample agreed to answer questions about their children's experiences. Tenants with children often considered their needs (such as school quality and having more space in a suburban voucher unit than one in the central city) when making movement decisions, and the experiences of children factored heavily into the overall level of satisfaction of tenants. Of the 10 who answered questions about their children's schooling, six were dissatisfied with school quality and experiences (60 percent). In contrast to parents in Massey et al.'s (2013) study who felt less worried about their children after moving to better neighborhoods, these parents expressed high levels of worry over their children's experiences. They cited their children's experience of both race based harassment and class based derogatory labels such as "Section 8 moocher." Other experiences included a child being told that "if it wasn't for Martin Luther King, Jr, they wouldn't be here" (in the Antelope Valley), and one parent reporting that a group of children chose to dress as Ku Klux Klan members as a prank on career day. One tenant recounted that she was pleased her son could now walk to school, but worried that his repeated experiences of police harassment put him in danger when walking back and forth unaccompanied by her. Another tenant referred to her children as having to figuratively "fight their way through school." It is little surprise that four of the six tenants who report dissatisfaction with schools were subsequently dissatisfied with their overall experience in the Antelope Valley and claimed that they were happier before they moved to the area. These feelings of discomfort are associated with dissatisfaction with the move to the Antelope Valley, and stand in contrast to the positive economic findings from Chetty et al. (2015) and positive social and educational effects documented by Massey et al. (2013).

TENANTS' EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES

Although most respondents who were employed prior to moving continued to have jobs after moving, the roughly 70 mile distance between the Antelope Valley and the City of Los Angeles (see Figure 1) forced all but one to leave their prior jobs and find employment in their new neighborhoods. Respondents work in a variety of occupations ranging from computer repair to transportation, generally service industry occupations without consistent healthcare and retirement benefits. Sixteen of 18 respondents (88.9 percent) reported difficulty in finding a job, attributing this problem to a mix of factors, including a difficult economy, discrimination, a lack of government job services, and a lack of quality public transportation. One tenant attributed the economic problems in the area to a lack of sustained development that could support the population; another suggested that it was easier to find housing than work because of the ongoing recession. One explanation for these findings is that the same economic circumstances that created such a glut of voucher availability also contributed to the difficult employment environment that voucher movers faced upon arrival. Many tenants are dissatisfied with or unaware of government services such as job training and placement and report extreme

dissatisfaction with the area's public transportation (so much so that one tenant speculated that public transportation was being purposefully underfunded by the city as a means of making life difficult for its low-income users). Life in the Antelope Valley makes it necessary to have access to a vehicle in order to get to potential work locations (imposing a new cost on tenants), as public transportation is insufficient inside and between these cities. This finding reinforces other research suggesting the importance of transportation in shaping the experiences and quality of life of voucher users (Blumenberg and Pierce 2014; Pendall et al. 2015; Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012). The distance between the Antelope Valley and the City of Los Angeles also means that voucher tenants must have access to a vehicle in order to maintain social and economic connections to the city.

Antelope Valley respondents also claim that the city's business owners prefer to hire long-time residents who, as they put it, belong in the city. This finding recalls Farley et al.'s (1978) discovery that real estate agents mimic the biases they expect their clients to have. New residents from Los Angeles, or who are of minority status, are looked upon less favorably and have a more difficult time learning about and getting new jobs. One of the respondents, Martin, a middle-aged black voucher holder, explains:

"If you're coming out here for work, keep stepping. There are not that many businesses. You're not going to find a job out here. You can find places to rent easier than you can find a job. But jobs are scarce, it's obvious. In LA there are jobs all the time, there's more businesses and people are steady expanding... here it's expanding but you'd be lucky. For instance there was that Superior Warehouse that opened. There were a few jobs there, but that thing is gone, now you have to wait for another store to be opened."⁹

As outsiders, Martin and others are often last in line for employment opportunities or are left waiting for new ones to open. In addition to the difficulty of learning about jobs in an unfamiliar setting and of being less preferred by employers because of their newcomer status, Antelope Valley tenants report experiencing high levels of employment discrimination, most often on the basis of race. Eight of 11 (72.7 percent) Antelope Valley respondents report discrimination in employment and hiring, and some provide elaborate stories describing their experiences of being turned down or steered away from jobs in ways that suggested to them bias against minority applicants or newcomers to the area. Tenants generalize from their experiences of employment discrimination to the city as a whole, reasoning that if an employer treats them differently because of their identity, this is indicative of the city's overall attitude toward them. Despite reporting having experienced discrimination, tenants remain employed at rates roughly similar to their premove status.

While discrimination may not ultimately prevent tenants from finding employment, it may push voucher holders to settle for jobs for which they are overqualified. For example, Janice is a tenant with professional work experience who moved to the Antelope Valley after losing a job, but felt she had the skills and capacity to return to work in a managerial role. The loss of her job in Los Angeles forced her to rely on housing assistance to support her children. Although she had no particular preference for the Antelope Valley, her immediate need for housing combined with the availability of voucher units there led her to move. However, this move has limited her access to quality employment. As a result

of the poor economy and constrained labor market in the Antelope Valley at the time, she has been forced to find employment at a cellular retailer in a sales capacity that she describes as significantly below her skill level. While this diminution of status is painful to accept, she hopes her superiors see her skills and eventually promote her to a managerial position of similar pay and status as she previously had. In the meanwhile, she is thankful that the voucher system has allowed her to maintain a good living situation for herself and her children. Narratives like Janice's suggest that tenants reconcile themselves to trade-offs between factors such as quality of employment and quality of housing.

These findings agree with prior research that shows a small degree of change in the economic circumstances of voucher users, but they may also unveil some of the specific methods by which economic growth might be curtailed. Voucher users continue to experience clustering and segregation, showing that movement that might appear desegregatory at the city level might not always be so at the local level. Voucher users also face significant economic hurdles such as discrimination, barriers to access, and a poor employment environment. These dynamics might contribute to the poor economic outcomes seen in larger MTO and voucher studies. But while this review of the socioeconomic experiences of tenants the Antelope Valley illuminates some general experiences, a closer examination of tenants' social experiences further reveals how important these dynamics are to the overall quality of life of voucher movers.

LIFE IN THE "BUNKER:" HOW VOUCHER TENANTS EXPERIENCE AND ADAPT TO A HOSTILE CLIMATE

Beyond summaries of voucher movers' experiences, which suggest the difficulties of social and economic integration into new neighborhoods, these interviews revealed further patterns of day-to-day harassment that served to intimidate voucher holders and force them to change their social behavior. Descriptions of scrutiny from immediate neighbors, the community at large, the housing administration, and the police were common, and often followed by stories of other tenants (friends or relatives) who had been evicted after calls from neighbors and investigations based on scant evidence. The threat of a similar experience leads tenants to consciously restrict their social activities, private and public behavior, and overall visibility in an attempt to avoid triggering a housing investigation, protect their Section 8 status, and focus on priorities such as the education and well-being of their children. The following cases illustrate this phenomenon and represent experiences shared by many respondents.

1. Barbara

Barbara is a tenant in her 50s who has lived in eastern Lancaster for 11 years, having moved from South Central Los Angeles. She cites congestion, gangs, and a poor environment for raising her children as her main reasons for enrolling in the voucher program and moving to a suburb. When asked about her satisfaction with her neighborhood, she mentions many of the problems tenants have described above, such as poor social services, a lack of jobs, perceived discrimination, and unsatisfactory schools. But she also focuses on the scrutiny she feels from her neighbors and the Housing Authority. To illustrate, she describes an incident when the police visited her for a noise complaint while she was moving into her current rental. She asked the officer, "How am I supposed to

have loud music playing when I don't even have any furniture or anything?" When she asked the officer where the complaint originated from, he responded that a neighbor had called it in. This type of police visit has happened three times since her most recent move.

Barbara believes that her white neighbors call the police as a way to pressure Section 8 tenants and possibly have them kicked out. She claims that the police inform the Housing Authority of their visits to Section 8 tenants' units and fears that the Housing Authority may follow up with her for having had too many police visits, regardless of their merit. The unwarranted visits make her feel that she cannot call the police if she needs assistance in a real emergency.

Barbara also fears the Housing Authority's frequent and intrusive inspections of Section 8 tenants. Her sister recently lost her Section 8 voucher because a noncohabitating partner had used her apartment as a mailing address. The Housing Authority evicted her based on the conclusion that she had been housing a tenant who was not on the lease. With this in mind, Barbara describes her own fears of eviction:

"I just moved here. I still get mail from the previous tenant. So that previous tenant, I have no control over them not changing their address. So therefore, when the tenant's stuff comes in my mailbox, I just put it return to sender. Because if they catch anybody else's address and they're not on your voucher, they will terminate you. The police [Housing Authority inspectors] when they come, will look in your mailbox, in your car. They look in your drawers, and in all your paperwork. They look through everything, your computers, everything."

"I'm afraid, you know, if I have family visiting and they [inspectors] decide they want to come over, they might see a family member's toothbrush, or they might see a family member's car. And you know, their whole assumption will go into 'oh you have an unauthorized tenant.' Do you understand what I'm saying? They just pick at that. So you know, I follow the rules. I don't want them kinda problems."

While Barbara states that she is just following the rules, it is clear that she is curbing some legal behaviors in order to avoid scrutiny from her neighbors and the community. For example, she has adapted to this environment by consciously keeping a low profile, "Now I just don't play any music, I try to keep the peace. No music, no company. Not that I had a lot of traffic anyways. I just try to stay to myself. It's been a few months since the cops have been out here." Even among visiting family, Barbara is careful, recalling having said to them "You can't be here more than that many [a few] days . . . they could terminate me!" Barbara sees no other option than to adopt this bunker mentality. She explains, "For instance, if they terminate me, how can I pay \$1,650 for rent? If they kick me out, where will me and my kids go? How will we live? I'm not going to say there are not people who abuse the program, but the ones who do not . . . get treated just as bad."

Barbara's case describes her fear of the day-to-day scrutiny by her neighbors. Her precarity—the fact that her living conditions are in a constant state of jeopardy—has led her to change her behavior so as to be noticed as little as possible. Her experience of employment discrimination, and her children's negative experiences at school¹⁰ suggest that in many ways, she is being shut out of mainstream Antelope Valley society. While she can live in the neighborhood, she cannot feel as though she is a part of it. While she can apply for jobs, she is less likely to receive one. And while she can enroll her children in

schools she considers better than those she left in South Central Los Angeles, her children must endure poor treatment. Though living in Lancaster may have had salutary effects on her socioeconomic outcomes, her social status is one of constant tension and her health and happiness is uncertain.

2. Maxine

While Barbara fears the scrutiny of those in her immediate surroundings, other tenants feel this scrutiny on a larger scale. Maxine, a mother of two living in East Palmdale, reports experiencing a hostile public environment and fearing increased scrutiny from the County Housing Authority, which inspects and enforces housing policies for Section 8 tenants. She too fears an eviction on minor grounds.

Maxine came to Palmdale from the City of Los Angeles almost five years ago. She describes the city as being in a contradictory situation. She says that although her landlord wanted to rent to her, “the housing program itself seems like they don’t want you on housing. It’s kinda weird, its like a catch twenty-two. So out here they make it a practice to try to get people out of here (that are on housing). They look for things.” Here, Maxine echoes Barbara’s experiences by noting how the program’s inspectors appear to be actively looking for evidence that they can use as grounds for eviction. Maxine goes on to cite the collusion of local media in feeding sentiments of animosity toward Section 8 tenants: “It’s been splattered all in the newspaper. If you read the newspaper you’re always hearing, okay, this is going on with housing, and they’re trying to hire more investigators to go in to find out who else lives there.”

In response to a public environment where Section 8 users are under great scrutiny, Maxine has become protective of her identity as a program participant. When asked about the reasons she would leave the Antelope Valley, she insists that her main concern is the feeling of “not being wanted.” She explains:

“The atmosphere makes me feel like I don’t want to be there. Because if you took a survey, if you went up and down the street and nobody knew I was on housing and you asked them how am I, they would say, oh she’s a good neighbor. But at the same time, because I know I am on housing, when I read about housing, well, you know, it’s like they don’t want me here. . .”

In addition to fearing the scrutiny by neighbors, Maxine feels targeted by local police. During one incident, she and her son were pulled over for a speeding ticket. Minutes after being issued the ticket they were pulled over again by the same police officer down the street, this time for a broken light. She was frustrated by what she perceived as a malicious second stop. She explained, “They do harass you a lot. You really have to be careful about what you do around here.” She continued, “I have a gut feelin’ that these people in Lancaster are very racist. The harassment alone would drive a person away from the community. I never had problems like this when I was in LA.” Both of her sons, one an adult and the other a teenager, have been harassed by the police. These experiences of police harassment, shared by many respondents as well as other minorities, speak to systemic issues in Lancaster and Palmdale.

Maxine's resulting feelings of alienation manifest physically in difficulty sleeping and anxiety. She poses:

"How could you rest, how could you sleep at night, how could you relax? Even if you did what you are supposed to do, it's a very uncomfortable feeling that somebody could be down the street watching you, watching who goes in and out. You're scared to have company because you don't want somebody pulling up saying, 'Do they live here?' You might not even want your company to know you're on a housing program. You might not want anybody to know. I know I don't. So it's like, I can't have company, because every time you turn around, somebody's saying something. . . It's like, why would you offer a program for people to live in if you make it uncomfortable for them to live?"

Maxine is also frustrated that people in her neighborhood treat her as if she was guilty of violating the rules, and this unfairness has clearly soured her on the program and her neighborhood.

"Who wants to live here? Even if you trying to fit in to the community and live amongst homeowners and live as though you are a homeowner, because housing has granted you that opportunity, because of what everyone else does and takes advantage of the program, why should I have to suffer? Why should I have to feel unwanted? Because I am on the housing program? It's awful."

Maxine clearly limits her social activity at home in order to avoid scrutiny and investigations that can lead to evictions. "I just live my life. I live in my house, I enjoy my home, I enjoy my children, and I don't bother my neighbors. I'm very reserved." In addition to adopting this bunker mentality, Maxine has not built social connections in her neighborhood and has instead opted to live her social life outside the Antelope Valley: "Everybody I know and associate with don't live out here. So I have to travel for my associations, have to travel to go to different events, and I come back home and this is where I sleep. And when I'm involved with different activities, it's never here, it's always away. I have to pack up and leave."

These accounts make it clear that social integration has not occurred for the community of voucher tenants in the Antelope Valley. Maxine's avoidance of scrutiny leads her to stay at home and be reserved, to restrict and change her behavior, and to conduct her social life outside of the Antelope Valley. Indeed, the experiences described by the tenants I interviewed reflect broader developments in the area. A number of other respondents in the Antelope Valley echo the experiences of Barbara and Maxine. Most respondents feel that their neighbors and community are suspicious of them and that they have received an icy and distant reception. One says she constantly feels under watch in her daily life, "but I'm not going to break." Another keeps to herself because she does not want to give anyone a reason to evict her, and another says she feels safe only because she keeps to herself. Many described adapting their presentations of self to avoid risking public scrutiny. These adaptations included watching one's speech patterns when talking to others in public and choosing not to wear clothing or drive a car that would attract attention. One tenant described choosing to park inside her garage instead of on a driveway, another spoke of keeping the garage, windows, and blinds closed to avoid being seen.

These adaptations help explain why multiple tenants expressed the feeling of leading “a double life” and “keeping a secret” in order to protect their voucher status.

Despite the voucher system’s private configuration, tenants are rendered socially visible because of associations made between race and economic status, and they respond by restricting their public lives in order to be less visible and noticeable. The fact that this racial association opens up the ability to monitor, intimidate, and harass voucher tenants points to the importance of race in the experiences of tenants, the outcomes of the voucher program, and echoes findings in mixed-income settings (McCormick et al. 2012). Multiple tenants say they have no one to reach out to and no one to rely on, responses that echo the findings of McAdoo (1982) and Tatum (1999) about the benefits of family social support. The cumulative effect of these practices of avoidance and social protection was the widespread sense among tenants I spoke to that the voucher community in the Antelope Valley was atomized. Although not every interview touched on this issue, those that did repeatedly produced the same observation. Several tenants commented on the paradox that while the voucher population was growing, a community of voucher tenants was not. The self-protective behaviors of tenants who kept to themselves rather than risk additional scrutiny may have contributed to the inability to organically grow a community of black voucher holders in the Antelope Valley. Although the “bunker mentality” described as a response to scrutiny from neighbors may have been a rational way to avoid possible investigations or evictions, it may also inhibit the types of social capital that can be used to find new jobs or other opportunities, what Briggs (1998) theorizes is needed for economic mobility. In this sense, the role of race as a proxy for housing status and a basis for hostility might not just have social effects on tenants but might ultimately prevent them from realizing economic opportunities in new neighborhoods.

Another factor that might contribute to the feeling of being disconnected from community was that tenants reported that Los Angeles’ main black newspaper, the *LA Sentinel*, did not deliver to the Antelope Valley, forcing them to read papers such as the *Antelope Valley Press* which did not cover issues relevant to them. Ultimately, the main sources of support for voucher tenants were their communities and families back in the city of Los Angeles and the churches they found in the Antelope Valley, which proved to be an important social sanctuary for religiously active Christian voucher holders. The fact that tenants continued to rely on communities and families over an hour away in Los Angeles proper may be an indication of the degree to which tenants have not been able to gain social support that could be used to help get through everyday life situations (Briggs 1998).

Despite the social and psychological costs to tenants of adopting such a bunker mentality, there is reason to believe that these self-protective behaviors were well justified. In 2008, Lancaster’s mayor Rex Perris asserted during a City Council meeting, “Make no mistake, this City wants to limit the number of Section 8 units that are placed in this community” (City of Lancaster 2008). To do this, Perris proposed various measures to aggressively investigate and enforce any violations of Section 8 rules, cut his city off from the county housing authority, and limit business licenses for Section 8 housing. During the same meeting, he emphasized that it was “time to go to war” against Section 8. Between 2008 and 2011, Lancaster partnered with Palmdale and the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s department on an enforcement program that directed additional investigatory power toward the Section 8 community in the Antelope Valley.

In 2011, community groups and civil rights organizations filed a lawsuit against the two cities and the County Sheriff's Department, alleging that the program was unconstitutional because the vast majority of tenants subjected to additional scrutiny were black (Williams and Simmons, 2011). The U.S. Department of Justice launched investigations that concluded that the defendants were engaged in a pattern of unconstitutional enforcement designed to pressure black Section 8 tenants out of the Antelope Valley. Although the cities and County Sheriff's Department did not accede to these claims or admit fault in their separate settlements of these cases, they did agree to monetary compensation and reforms intended to preclude racial targeting (U.S. Department of Justice 2015a; 2015b).

Tenants' perceptions that they were at risk of eviction were also well founded. Despite the fact that the Antelope Valley holds less than 25 percent of the Section 8 users in the County, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that fully 51 percent of Section 8 evictions in Los Angeles County in 2009 occurred in the Antelope Valley. The rate of Section 8 terminations in Lancaster was five times higher than the county average. Between 2006 and 2009, one in every 25 Section 8 tenants in Lancaster was evicted (on grounds such as noise violations or suspicion of extra tenants living in the unit). Six tenants I spoke to explicitly described incidents of police harassment, including raids on their homes or the homes of their fellow voucher tenants.

Despite all of these difficulties, the tenants I spoke to rarely say they planned to move or considered moving a realistic option. Some tenants focused on the benefits of their circumstances for their children or families, who enjoyed more spacious housing, safer neighborhoods, and better schools. Parents were willing to exchange their personal comfort and social lives for these benefits. One tenant, whose sentiments were shared by several other parents, stated that she would consider moving after her children finished school, but preferred not to disrupt their education in the meanwhile. This concern appears to have won out over other negative experiences. Other tenants voiced economic or program-related worries about moving. As earlier quotes from Barbara indicated, tenants often cannot visualize being able to find housing of similar quality in other areas. The risks (perceived or real) associated with attempting to "port" the voucher to another part of the county were significant.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE VOUCHER EXPERIENCE WITH PUBLIC HOUSING EXPERIENCES

The Westmont neighborhood of the City of Los Angeles is a useful site for better understanding the experiences of voucher tenants moving to the Antelope Valley. As many authors have pointed out (Vale 2013; Vale and Freemark 2012), the voucher program is inextricably linked to traditional public housing. As public housing was demolished over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, many of those units were replaced with vouchers. Thus, many of the tenants using vouchers either once were public housing tenants, or could plausibly have been public housing tenants, had the voucher program not replaced public housing. Thus it was not surprising that many of the voucher tenants that I interviewed reported coming from neighborhoods like Westmont and programs such as public housing.¹¹ The experiences of public housing tenants in Westmont provide some information about what voucher tenants' lives might have been like had they been living

in the counterfactual scenario in which their vouchers had not replaced public housing. Rather than implying that the difficulties associated with a voucher would simply disappear without the program, this context helps uncover the trade-offs between the benefits and difficulties associated with both federal housing options.

Westmont's public housing is different in many ways from vouchers in the Antelope Valley. Buildings are close together but largely blend into their surroundings. Public housing in Westmont generally consists of moderately sized apartment complexes of roughly 10–12 units. These units are located in older neighborhoods and are often hard to identify except for certain telltale characteristics. Instead of being surrounded by vacancies, these units are in dense neighborhoods that lack open space and are reported to have high crime rates.

Despite these differences, public housing tenants in Westmont share much in common with tenants who move to the Antelope Valley. They often move into public housing units for economic reasons such as job loss, or in emergency situations such as having lived with a parent whose housing suddenly fell through. They also report a similar set of desires for their housing—better living conditions (larger quarters, access to public space), and improved physical safety and school quality. In terms of their neighborhood satisfaction, the right-hand column of Table 3 shows that most public housing tenants reported feeling comfortable and welcomed by their neighbors and community, but only five of nine said they felt safe (56.6 percent). While most Westmont respondents reported being pleased with their neighbors and with their community's friendliness and social environment, some said they feel intimidated by the potential for gang violence. These responses highlight the trade-offs tenants are forced to make. In Westmont, tenants trade their safety to get stability, while in the Antelope Valley tenants sacrifice their social conditions for housing quality. I asked tenants in Westmont public housing whether they had considered moving using the voucher program. Although many expressed a desire to move, and were interested in the same factors that voucher tenants valued (space, safety, and schools), they felt that the Antelope Valley was too far a location for them to successfully move to.

DISCUSSION

Voucher movement poses a unique set of challenges to qualitative researchers. The difficulties of locating voucher tenants in person without traditional avenues of access shaped the study's methodology and limited its sample size. While this study explores critical questions about the social experiences of voucher tenants, it does so by relying on a small number of interviewees located through visits to the County Housing Authority, methods with clear limitations. These shortcomings can be overcome through larger follow-up studies or surveys administered to a larger population of voucher holders in cooperation with local Housing Authorities. Nevertheless, despite this study's limited scope, it contains several important findings that help identify conditions that may prevent voucher movers from achieving social and economic mobility.

First, the characteristics of the Antelope Valley itself suggest questions for practitioners and scholars. Although the Antelope Valley is generally more prosperous than the typical sites of public housing in Los Angeles County, voucher holders live in a relatively confined set of neighborhoods within the Antelope Valley, and there are stark differences between

the household incomes of black and white residents. These complications raise the question of what is the proper reference group for incoming voucher holders—the city as a whole, or the specific communities and neighborhoods that they move into through the program?

Interviews of voucher holders further reveal that, despite the privacy afforded by renting a house or apartment through the private market, voucher holders moving to the Antelope Valley are easily identified by their neighbors through an association of their race with participation in the Section 8 program. Unable to blend in to their neighborhoods, these tenants are aggressively monitored by their neighbors, who report any possible transgression to a variety of local housing and law enforcement authorities. Because these tactics are likely to trigger investigations that could lead to evictions from the voucher program, and because the voucher program is a nearly irreplaceable financial and social benefit, tenants protect themselves by retreating from public space as a way to avoid scrutiny.

These findings are similar in many ways to those documented in McCormick et al.'s (2012) study of the dynamics in a mixed-income development—suggesting that race plays a similar role in eroding tenant privacy across both programs. These findings also suggest factors that may hinder voucher tenants' successful economic integration in new neighborhoods. For example, employment discrimination on the basis of race or newcomer status might be an obstacle preventing dispersal programs from achieving larger economic gains in other settings. And when tenants withdraw from public space to avoid public scrutiny and possible eviction, they may also be curtailing their ability to develop strong local social networks that can help provide both everyday social support and avenues for economic advancement. To the extent that social problems such as harassment and perceived employment discrimination might actually be barriers to economic progress, these findings build on the perception that social integration plays an intermediate role between movement and economic integration. And to the degree that the experiences of voucher holders in the Antelope Valley are replicated in other settings of voucher movement, these findings may reinforce the need for program administrators to consider the role of race and neighborhood context in shaping tenant outcomes.

Despite the difficulties and indignities experienced by voucher tenants in the Antelope Valley, the tenants I spoke to almost universally preferred to stay. This is particularly true for tenants with children, and highlights the ways in which Chetty et al.'s (2015) findings resonate with parents. This finding is easier to understand when seen in the broader context of federal housing support. Tenants in public housing in Westmont were also engaged in rational decision making, weighing factors such as affordability, location, safety, and schools when determining which imperfect option was right for them. When considering the comments of tenants in both settings, what comes through most clearly is that the most important function of either program is the provision of stable affordable housing options. Prioritizing the provision and expansion of this support over goals such as dispersal may be the best way to respond to the needs of low-income tenants.

Notes

¹Covington et al. (2011) estimate that it benefitted at least 3.4 million people in 2008. Schussheim (1998) estimates that this number was 1.4 million in 1998.

²These include the purposeful renaming of sites so as not to reference or recall former public housing structures whose reputations became entangled with crime and violence, and efforts to design new developments so as to be indistinguishable from private developments for passersby.

³See Graves (2010) and Joseph and Chaskin (2010) for other examples.

⁴However, as interviews proceed, many private neighbors reveal that in fact although they think of the mixed-income development as a site of crime, they cannot in fact name or recall any instances of crime occurring there. In fact, the interviews reveal a lack of meaningful interaction with publicly supported residents, showing how strong a discourse around public housing is in creating these shared meanings.

⁵These findings echo other (nonvoucher) scholarship around the Black suburban experience, including Feagin (1991), Tatum (1999), Feagin and Eckberg (1980), and Lacy (2007).

⁶Data on these tenants are located online, at <http://www.huduser.org/portal/datasets/assths.html>.

⁷See Chapter 11 of the Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles (HACOLA)'s Administrative Plan: Setting Payment Standards and Determining Rent Reasonableness, available at <http://www3.lacdc.org/CDCWebsite/uploadedFiles/HA/Amended%202009%Admin%20Plan.pdf>.

⁸Data from the American Community Survey and the National Transit Database, compiled by Reuben Fischer-Baum, indicates that the Lancaster-Palmdale area ranks as the 143rd of 290 cities in an index of trips per resident. See: <http://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/how-your-citys-public-transit-stacks-up/>

⁹All respondent names have been altered to protect anonymity.

¹⁰In addition to being dissatisfied with the school's academic quality, Barbara reported incidents in which her children were taunted with language that included references (known or assumed) to her family's Section 8 status.

¹¹Of the other tenants, some were already using vouchers in other locations, some were in private housing but signed up for vouchers due to an economic crisis, at least one was homeless and came to the voucher from a community assistance program, and a small number reported coming from outside Los Angeles County.

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