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The New *Man in the House* Rules: How the Regulation of Housing Vouchers Turns Personal Bonds Into Eviction Liabilities

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ABSTRACT

Whereas federal aid to the poor has traditionally focused on support for families, a central contradiction in these policies is the degree to which the state employs antifamily modes of regulation and punishment, a finding consistent across welfare, health, and child services. I extend this analysis to Housing Choice Vouchers, the nation's largest rental assistance program. Interviews with voucher renters show how, like welfare's early *man in the house* rules, the public-private regulation of the program turns personal bonds into eviction liabilities. I trace these vulnerabilities to two rules: one banning unauthorized tenants from residing in the home, and another banning drug- and crime-related activity. After documenting how the enforcement of these rules forces tenants to choose between family and housing, I suggest that these dynamics illustrate similarities between the punitive regulation of housing and other safety net programs.

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Before we moved into Pruitt-Igoe, the welfare department came to our home, they talked with my mother about moving into the housing project, but the stipulation was that my father could not be with us. They would put us into the housing project only if he left the state. Mother and father discussed it and they decided that it was best for the twelve children for the father to leave the home, and that's how we got into the projects.

—Jacqueline Williams, Pruitt-Igoe resident

There was even a night staff of men who worked for the welfare department whose job was to go to the home of welfare recipients and they searched to find if there was a man in the home. Sometimes men came back at night to be with their families. Some were found in closets, hiding.

—Joyce Ladner, PhD, researcher at Pruitt-Igoe

These reflections describe how welfare's *man in the house* rules broke up families entering the St. Louis, Missouri, Pruitt-Igoe Housing Projects in the 1960s (Friedrichs, 2011). Part of a long history of the state's moral regulation of the poor (Abramovitz, 2017; Gordon, 1994), the rules assumed that married women should not need welfare assistance because the family's income should be earned by the man in the household; and, conversely, single women deserved aid because women should not work (Gustafson, 2011; Handler & Hasenfeld, 2006). To enforce the rules, state welfare offices conducted midnight raids aimed at finding evidence that a man might be present in the household. Such evidence would suggest that the woman was morally unfit to raise her children, and that the man—presumed to be the household's breadwinner—was engaged in welfare fraud (Reich, 1962). Public housing tenants who also received welfare were subject to these rules and were thus compelled to break up their families or hide personal relationships as a condition of receiving support (Borders, 2017; Freidrichs, 2011; Porter, Miller, Rainwater, & Koestler, 1967).

Although the *man in the house* rules were struck down by the Supreme Court in 1968, social scientists have documented the persistence of punitive modes of regulating social safety net programs including housing, often with particular attention to women and families, and often through strategies that criminalize poor people. Schram, Fording, and Soss (2008) describe this as the punitive turn in poverty governance, and Roberts (2009) identifies the entry of Black families into social welfare programs as the precipitating factor that drove this turn. The primary area of social support where this has been documented is the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. Its 1996 reform into the Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) program shrunk aid while criminalizing recipients by imposing regulations that presumed their guilt, excluding poor people with certain criminal histories from receiving aid, and sharing program data with the criminal justice system (Gustafson, 2011). Notably, health programs such as Medicaid and the child welfare and foster care systems have also become sites of deep government intrusion into the private lives of women, and this intrusion has expanded from physical space to digital space (Bridges, 2017; Headworth, 2019; Roberts, 2009).

In light of how punitive welfare regulation shaped public housing in the 1960s and continues to shape these programs through drug and criminal record bans today, this article asks what happens when today's punitive turn touches public housing's successor, the Housing Choice Voucher program. Whereas many have documented how similar racialized discourses of crime, deservingness, and failure have driven policy changes in both welfare and housing assistance, particularly the decision to demolish significant parts of the nation's public housing stock (Goetz, 2000, 2013b), we know much less about whether recipients of housing assistance programs might experience forms of punitive regulation similar to those documented in other parts of the welfare state, and if so, what those experiences might be like.

To examine this question, I study a unique case of Black voucher renters in the Antelope Valley—the northernmost suburb of Los Angeles County, California—who were subjected to punitive regulation by the housing authority, city, county, and their neighbors (I describe the case in more detail in Setting). Existing research on the case illustrates how the city, county, housing authority, and local residents partnered to police voucher renters (Hayat, 2016; Ocen, 2012). It also documents the social exclusion of voucher renters and the consequences of that exclusion for their neighborhood integration and economic mobility (Kurwa, 2015). Here, I focus on how punitive program regulation affected their personal, family, and social lives.

Through interviews with 39 Housing Choice Voucher tenants, I illustrate how this case parallels the patterns documented by welfare scholars. I use data from all respondents to broadly describe the conditions and experiences of voucher tenants in the Antelope Valley, but focus on the responses of nine tenants to illuminate just how extensively this case of voucher regulation emulates and builds upon welfare's now defunct *man in the house* rules. I show that voucher regulations such as bans on unauthorized residents and crime- and drug-free policies can be enforced in a manner that opens the intimate personal and family lives of renters to public scrutiny, that this scrutiny is conducted both by private actors such as neighbors and by the state, and that the outcomes of this public-private surveillance regime translate voucher renters' interpersonal and family bonds into eviction liabilities. Despite the fact that the voucher program prioritizes family units and family-based socio-economic mobility, in this case, the program is regulated in a way that incentivizes tenants to cut ties with family, not provide care to loved ones, and reduce social connections, to minimize the risk of eviction (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1994). The experiences of these tenants suggest increased attention should be paid to the ways housing rules can be applied punitively to tenants, and the effects such punitive regulation may have on tenants' lives.

This article does not attempt to assess whether its case study is representative of broader patterns and practices across housing authorities nationwide. Rather, it uses the case to highlight the possibility that local communities might escalate punitive regulation of voucher tenants, that this regulation can take advantage of existing program rules, and that when this happens, it can have significant personal and family consequences for voucher renters. Extending the analysis of a punitive turn to include what

it might look like in the case of housing vouchers can help broaden social science research about these programs in two ways.

First, whereas the dominant frames of social science research on housing assistance have focused on the social and economic consequences of racial segregation and disinvestment and the potential social and economic gains to be had when public housing tenants move to middle-class neighborhoods (Clampet-Lundquist & Massey, 2008; Ludwig et al., 2008; Massey, Albright, Casciano, Derickson, & Kinsey, 2013; Sampson, 2008; Wilson, 1987), substantial evidence of White opposition to integration exists (Bell, 2013; Harris, 1999; Quillian & Pager, 2001), and a growing body of research documents the historical role of policing and punishment in cities' responses to the Black movement (Derenoncourt, 2019; Muller, 2012). More work can be done to consider how these attitudes shape the reception and experiences specifically within the voucher program (Kurwa, 2015).

Second, scholarship on federal housing assistance programs can benefit from considering the role of policing as a repressive force in the lives of Black households. As hooks (1990, pp. 41–49) has described it, the home is both a place of refuge from racial oppression and a site of resistance to it. But much of the work that deals with the role of the criminal justice system in the context of housing assistance focuses not on the ways that policing invades, jeopardizes, and disrupts the home, but on spectacular incidents of crime and violence in public housing, the need for police intervention, and the impossibility of creating security in public housing (Goetz, 2013a; Venkatesh, 2000). These portrayals have also obscured the role of Black women organizers in creating alternate modes of community safety (Feldman & Stall, 2004; Leavitt, 1993). And they obscure the possibility that police as well as policing practices more broadly may constitute a social problem for tenants. Locating the place of policing in the historical and present-day circumstances of tenants in housing assistance programs should allow us to better understand the social forces affecting tenants' well-being and life outcomes.

Background

Welfare, Criminalization, and Privacy

The state's use of deservingness to provide, deny, or apportion aid has long been tied to a normative conception of the ideal poor—a White nuclear family in which the male member was the primary earner. Aid was structured to support or reproduce this ideal, deviations from it were punished, and poor Black people were systematically excluded from or disadvantaged in the program (Constance-Huggins, 2011). Over time, the tide of disgust toward poor women who failed to model the deserving poor transformed from a judgment of poor women to a specific focus on Black women. This was marked by relentless attacks on welfare that centered on Black women during the Reagan administration (Hancock, 2004). Welfare recipients, particularly Black women, were increasingly portrayed as dependents, cheats, and welfare queens, and this portrayal shaped the reforms passed in the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA).

PRWORA shrunk aid levels, imposed time-limits and work requirements, and empowered states to impose further punitive regulations on aid recipients. These reforms also increased the criminalization of the poor by allowing the use of welfare data to identify those who had broken laws and remove them from eligibility; prohibiting access to aid for those convicted of felonies; and introducing biometric imaging, fingerprinting, and drug testing in the data collection and enrollment process—ostensibly to identify welfare fraud and drug use among aid recipients (Gustafson, 2011; Kohler-Hausmann, 2015). Most important among these policies was the sharing of participant data with police agencies, which allowed them to use the welfare system to further criminal legal system ends. Gustafson argues that these measures, widely understood to have little to negative efficiency, were less about achieving policy goals of cost savings and work encouragement and more about degradation—communicating disgust to the poor while reminding them of the state's power over their lives (Gustafson, 2013).

Following this trajectory reveals the ways it has been replicated in other contexts of state assistance, including both health services and housing. Bridges uses ethnographic data from a study of Medicaid to illustrate how the state surveils and accesses information about the intimate private lives of poor people, particularly as part of the process of enrolling participants in the program (Bridges, 2017). Bridges argues that because poor people must utilize these services to provide certain standards of care to their children or risk being deemed an unfit parent and losing them, they have no choice but to become subjected to this scrutiny. Thus, Bridges argues that the poor have no right to privacy in any meaningful sense of the term, meaning that the state's harm to them is even more significant than violating their privacy.

The Trajectory of Federal Housing Assistance

Like welfare policy more broadly, housing assistance policy must be understood in the longer history of the state's relationship and orientation toward poor families, and toward poor Black families in particular. Whereas there was some overlap between welfare and housing, in public housing itself documentation of the program's response to Black entry has focused more on shrinking the program, pushing families to work, and forcing tenants to move out of poor Black communities.

Tracing the history of development and reform in the Atlanta Housing Authority (Atlanta, Georgia), Vale shows that the early public housing developments saw themselves as catering to upwardly mobile but temporarily poor White families—the epitome of the deserving poor. Administrators saw themselves as benign landlords of these tenants, who needed only housing, not social intervention, and who were morally deserving of housing assistance. But as public housing programs developed, and most importantly desegregated, they transformed in the public eye from a platform for the upward mobility of worthy families to a safety net of last resort (Vale, 2013). This change was marked by concurrent trends of declining federal funding, local hostility toward public housing, poorer construction with fewer amenities, desegregating occupancy, and increased rates of the very poor in its tenancy. Although the composition of public housing tenants was simply a reflection of the nation's racialized economic inequality, policymakers often saw it as an indictment of public housing rather than an indictment of the country's economy. Based on that view, policymakers pushed to demolish public housing, only partially making up for it through mixed-income redevelopments and vouchers (Goetz, 2013a). And they pushed changes focused on conditioning the poor—favoring families that worked and pushing families out of predominantly Black central cities and toward more White suburbs.

In a 1965 report on trends in Black poverty and use of social services, then Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan accused Black families of cultural failures and attributed Black poverty to the failings and pathologies of Black families (Moynihan, 1965). Despite that at the time of his writing welfare policy was actively breaking up Black families through *man in the house* rules, Moynihan's opinion was that Black families and particularly Black male heads of households must be made to work, as families lacking this patriarchal labor structure were incompatible with socio-economic well-being. In the text and elsewhere he acknowledged structural forces driving racial inequality, but it was the cultural argument he made that gained significant attention (Gans, 2011; Graebner, 2002). Although that argument was rebuffed in much of the public discourse, the federal government has in the years since reorganized housing assistance policy in ways that can be read as synchronous with his thesis.

Beginning in the 1990s, changes to public housing policy have focused on encouraging and rewarding work, while reducing housing assistance available to low-income households without work (Levy, Edmonds, & Simington, 2018). Although federal rules were loosened, many local authorities continue to bar individuals with criminal records from admission (Walter, Viglione, & Tillyer, 2017). The Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998 imposed income targeting that sought to change the composition of public housing tenants (Solomon, 2005). To achieve its goal of reducing the concentration of poverty in public housing, the federal government lowered the

requirement for the fraction of very poor households that needed to be offered public housing. This opened up more units for housing authorities to rent to less poor tenants but left more of the very poorest without aid.

These changes have altered the composition of public housing's tenants, and the increasingly employed profile of tenants as a result of income targeting was treated as an indicator of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)'s increased success. Although framed in legislation and policy as encouraging self-sufficiency, the changes also reflect a response to the state's focus on the moral character and worthiness of tenants themselves. In a similar vein, the legislation also introduced community service requirements for public housing tenants. In the late 1990s, HUD introduced a Moving to Work (MTW) program that empowered 39 housing authorities across the country to impose a work requirement, along with using funds originally designated for housing to be used for self-sufficiency (work) programs (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2018). This change corresponds to the introduction of work requirements in TANF, and subsequent administrations have sought to expand the MTW program to more public housing authorities. Taken together, these reforms have changed federal housing assistance programs from ones that support those most in need to ones that make support available for poor people if they behave in ways the state values. This distancing implicitly works to discipline the poor by making state resources contingent on behavior.

Also rooted in the 1960s was the program's turn toward residential mobility (Polikoff, 2007). During the Civil Rights Movement, activists, civil rights litigants, and policymakers began to favor remedies to segregatory public housing that included residential mobility. Arguments were made that public housing was sited in ways that created or reinforced race and income segregation. Advocates argued for public housing to be scattered across urban areas or favored removing the state's role in housing construction and providing residents with vouchers to support their rent in the private market (Vale & Freemark, 2012; Winnick, 1995). Although the genesis of mobility reforms was in the 1960s, wholesale changes did not occur until the 1990s. Then, Wilson (1987) pointed to the isolation of Black families in areas of concentrated poverty that deprived them of opportunities to advance into the middle class. Resulting policy changes shifted federal housing assistance away from place-based support like public housing to tenant-based support, such as the voucher program. Ndubizu (2019) uses administrative records to show that race and gender bias were central to the Reagan administration's housing policy and its emphasis on vouchers rather than public housing. Today the voucher program is the largest rental assistance program, supporting roughly 5 million people in more than 2 million households. Through mobility counseling programs administered at the local level, the voucher program now enables and encourages tenants to move out of high-poverty neighborhoods and into neighborhoods with higher economic opportunity, although serious issues of discrimination and market inequalities have undermined this goal (Cunningham et al., 2018). Because of the structure of racial residential inequality, this mobility *de facto* entails the movement of poor Black families out of predominantly Black neighborhoods—a response to Wilson's thesis on the racialized effects of concentrated poverty.

The Evolving Regulation of Housing Assistance

As public housing transformed from work neutral and place based to increasingly work oriented and mobility based, the ways the program has been regulated and policed have also changed. The physical design of public housing buildings increasingly became carceral with the advent of the defensible space paradigm in urban design (Hunt, 2009). Beyond architectural design, carceral trends in public housing found federal expression in the Carter administration, which initiated changes in HUD regulations designed to facilitate the policing of public housing. Carter's 1978 Urban Initiatives Anti-Crime Program was ostensibly geared toward a comprehensive range of social problems in 152 public housing developments, but the program's most lasting and visible effect was to dramatically increase the surveillance and policing of public housing and the means by which it was carried out

(Hinton, 2016, pp. 287–288). The program introduced electronic card readers for entry, security booths, and fencing around projects. It also increased police presence in public housing, paid young residents to participate in community safety work, and introduced tenant patrols and floor watches. These programs criminalized public housing, signaling a default presumption that its residents and visitors were likely to commit or had already committed crimes. In reorienting the physical space of public housing to catch these presumed criminals, the administration made conditions of public housing prison-like (Hinton, 2016).

Beyond the physical characteristics of public housing, Bonnet (2019) documents how, beginning in the late 1980s, federal drug and housing bills focused on aligning public housing with the criminal legal system. The 1988 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, 1990 Affordable Housing Act, and 1996 Housing Opportunity Program Extension Act moved policy this way by first enabling housing authorities to evict families for an individual's drug offense, then explicitly mandating such evictions, then banning people with criminal records from becoming tenants in public housing.

In the 1990s, HUD began to tear down public housing and replace it with mixed-income redevelopments and vouchers (de Souza Briggs, Popkin, & Goering, 2010). But although the format of housing assistance became more varied, the underlying relationship between the state and tenants remained the same. Research on mixed-income units shows how they are regulated internally through a mix of formal regulation by building administrators and informal social control by private neighbors relying on building administrators for enforcement (McCormick, Joseph, & Chaskin, 2012).

Similarly, voucher housing is regulated not just by local housing authorities, but through local laws and local residents. As Ocen (2012) and Hayat (2016) illustrate, in both Antioch, California, and the Antelope Valley region of Los Angeles County (where this study is also focused), public–private regimes of voucher regulation emerged to pair neutral laws with discriminatory private enforcement. Ocen (2012) identifies regulations banning unauthorized residents from living with voucher tenants as an example. Private citizens make complaints to the housing authority alleging unauthorized residency, which leads to inspections, penalties, and possible eviction. The subjects of these complaints are often Black women, and the resulting evictions compound patterns of racial segregation. I extend these authors' analyses with data from interviews with voucher renters, predominantly Black women, which illustrate how voucher renters' personal and family lives are turned into vulnerabilities by this public–private policing regime. Elsewhere, in public housing regulation, authorities are implementing trespass rules that bar people with felony convictions from entering the grounds of public housing developments, another example of a facially neutral policy that, given its interaction with the racially biased criminal legal system, has racially disparate impacts (Zimmerman, 2011).

The punitive turn in poverty governance can be described by its governing logic (race and gender animus), its method of enforcement (intense surveillance by the state), and its consequences for the poor (benefit sanctions, denial of benefits, and fraud prosecution). In what follows I will argue that the experiences of voucher renters in the Antelope Valley show how these same categories would be filled by applying that framework to housing assistance. The governing logic of race and gender animus remains the same, the method of enforcement more centrally features regulation by private neighbors, and the consequences are primarily characterized by the threat of eviction.

Setting

Data for this article come from interviews with 39 voucher renters in the Antelope Valley, the northernmost suburb in Los Angeles county. Over the past 15 years, and particularly since the Great Recession, the valley has become an important location for Los Angeles area voucher renters to move to, because of its high vacancy rates and low rental prices relative to the rest of Los Angeles County, a pattern that follows Rongerude and Haddad's (2016) finding of voucher growth concentrated in urban cores and peripheries of Northern California.¹ Figure 1 illustrates the growth in the

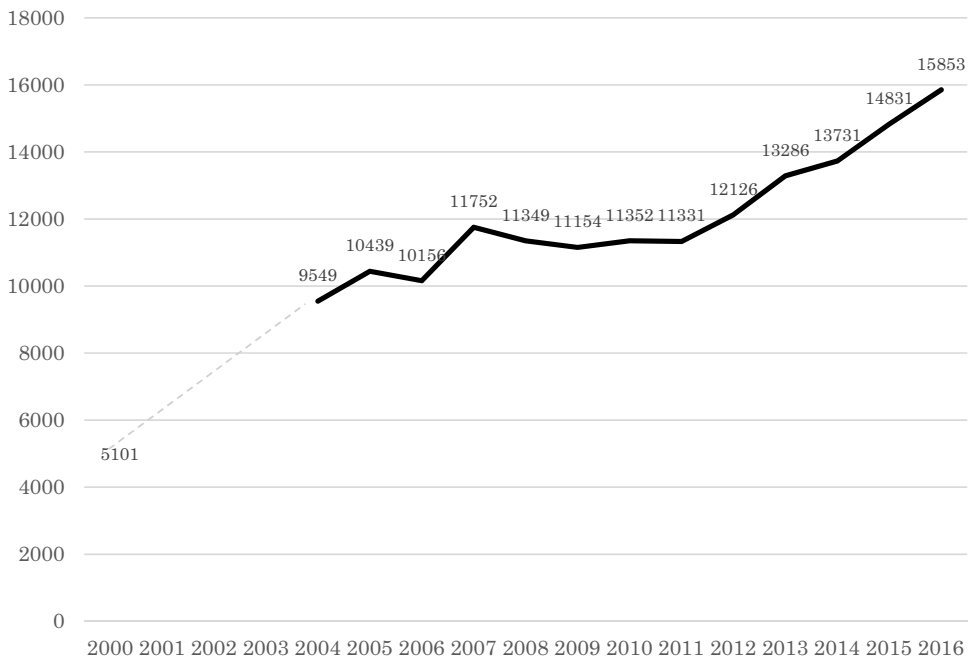


Figure 1. Growth in the population of Housing Choice Voucher tenants in the Antelope Valley, California, 2000–2016.

Source. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: Picture of Subsidized Housing (2001–2003 were omitted because of missing data).

number of voucher tenants in the valley from 2000 to 2016, using HUD's estimates of the total number of people in voucher households. During the period when this study was conducted, the total number of people in voucher households in the valley grew from approximately 11,331 to 15,853, a 39.9% increase (compared with the 34.5% increase in the population of the valley's main cities over the same period of time). Tenants in the study describe their movement as a product of economic necessity and the ability to find landlords willing to rent to voucher tenants rather than residential preference. In this manner, studying the social reaction to voucher movement can shed light on barriers to racial residential integration that voucher renters may face and that may explain their socioeconomic fortunes after movement.

As Ocen (2012) and Hayat (2016) document, the largest cities of the Antelope Valley, Lancaster and Palmdale, two took major steps to police voucher renters moving to the region: a policing partnership and a nuisance enforcement program. The first effort was to create a policing partnership with the Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles (today renamed the Los Angeles County Development Authority), and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. The partnership centered on housing authority fraud investigators policing the voucher program with data from the housing authority and assistance from Sheriff's Department officers. These investigations were focused on the Antelope Valley, but also occurred in neighborhoods around Los Angeles County such as Bellflower, Downey, and Paramount. They are distinct from housing quality inspections that are a routine part of voucher administration. And although other public housing authorities have versions of fraud investigation units,² this program was unique in its degree of coordination with other levels of government and in the degree of information it possessed on voucher renters. The program resembled what Gustafson has documented in the criminalization of welfare, as it created a nexus of information sharing between a social safety net program and the criminal legal system.

The limited years of data describing the scale of this policing program suggest that it was widely used in the valley and relied heavily on the complaints of neighbors. Per Housing Authority data,

between fiscal years (FY) 2007–2008 and 2009–2019, the cities of Lancaster and Palmdale were home to an average of 3,621 voucher households, roughly 20% of all voucher tenants in Los Angeles County. During those years, the Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles received 904 calls to its fraud hotline about voucher tenants in Lancaster and Palmdale, compared with 1,007 complaints made about voucher tenants in all the rest of Los Angeles County combined. Partly in response to these calls and partly through its own fraud investigation work, the authority conducted 1,377 investigations (to the rest of the county's 1,942) and proposed lease terminations in 496 cases, more than the 358 terminations proposed in the rest of Los Angeles County during the same time period. Whereas in the rest of the county 1 in every 100 voucher tenants had their lease terminated, in Palmdale 1 in every 12 and in Lancaster 1 in every 22 lost his or her lease. Whereas the first category of aggressive, collaborative policing of the voucher program was largely ended in 2012 through settlements of lawsuits challenging their constitutionality, a second, based around municipal nuisance code enforcement, persists as of this writing. However, even after the policing partnership designed to enforce complaints had ended, data from 2014 show that complaints made to the Housing Authority were still disproportionately targeted at Antelope Valley voucher renters, comprising 34% of all hotline complaints in the county.

The second effort was the passage of a nuisance ordinance in the City of Lancaster which allowed local residents to file complaints about their neighbors.³ The emphasis on this program was part of Lancaster's effort to fulfill its mayor's mandate to "[l]ook into a means for making it very easy for neighbors to file nuisance lawsuits with the assistance of the City against...Section 8 housing."⁴ The nuisance ordinance mandated that five calls made against a property in one year would trigger penalties against landlords or property owners. One way for landlords and property owners to avoid those penalties was to evict the renters who were the target of the calls. Information about this complaint process was distributed widely throughout the city. At present, some data exist that broadly substantiate the growth of the code enforcement program, but these data cannot disaggregate between types of calls or between targets of calls. Nevertheless, evidence exists that local residents were aware of the program and aware of the five-call threshold for eviction, and used the code enforcement hotline as a means to police their neighbors.⁵

These policing schemes created complex and varied pathways for voucher renters to experience surveillance and policing (from neighbors, possibly from housing authority staff during routine inspections, from the housing authority's fraud investigations, from city nuisance enforcement, and from county sheriff's officers) as well as eviction by a landlord or voucher termination by the housing authority. These pathways are captured in Figure 2. Therefore, voucher tenants recounting their experiences are often unclear about the actors producing their experiences of punitive housing regulation.

Whereas these policies make the case of voucher experiences in the Antelope Valley unique, they are not the only instance of punitive regulation of voucher renters. Data from the county enforcement program suggest it was used at low levels in other locations around the county, and research by Ocen (2012) and Hayat (2016) shows that similar enforcement schemes were adopted in Antioch, California, a key suburban destination for voucher movement out of the Bay Area during the late 2000s, as a location where similar tactics were used. And there is evidence that varieties of nuisance ordinances have been used to generate evictions of low-income renters (which can include voucher renters) in cities in Minnesota and Illinois. Thus, although this study reports on a unique case, its findings identify the consequences of policies and practices that may be adopted by other housing authorities and municipalities across the country, or which might even stem from the enforcement of current housing authority and municipal regulations.

Data and Methods

To understand the demographic and socioeconomic make-up of the region to which voucher tenants are moving, Table 1 provides a demographic snapshot of the Antelope Valley's two main

cities (Lancaster and Palmdale) using American Community Survey data collected between 2011 and 2015, an appropriate match to the data collection period between 2011 and 2016. These data show that the valley is racially mixed (a transition from White dominance during most of the last century), with low housing values, low rates of college completion, household incomes below the national median, and a high fraction of residents in poverty. Whereas these numbers suggest an area struggling in comparison with the state or country, they may also be seen as an improvement over neighborhoods that voucher renters often move from inside Los Angeles proper. As the next section will show, there are clear demographic differences between the racial makeup of the valley (as shown in [Table 1](#)) and its voucher renting population (as shown in [Tables 2 and 3](#)).

Conducting qualitative interviews with voucher renters is methodologically challenging. Although the rate of voucher usage in the valley is quite high relative to other parts of Los Angeles County, voucher renters make up just 5% of the population of the valley's main cities, Lancaster and Palmdale. This makes it extraordinarily difficult to recruit respondents by door-to-door canvassing. Instead, I solicited interviews with voucher renters at the local office of the Housing Authority of Los Angeles County—the main administrative office overseeing the program. Sitting at a folding table near the office, I asked individuals leaving the office if they would like to participate in the unpaid study, described its eligibility (an adult renting in the Antelope Valley through the Housing Choice Voucher program), and provided information about the length of the interview, the nature of the questions, and confidentiality. Using this strategy, I interviewed 39 voucher renters between 2011 and 2016. Interviews varied widely in length—ranging from as short as approximately 15 minutes to as long as roughly 1 hour. The variation is explained by participants' types of experiences (those with few strongly positive or negative experiences had shorter interviews) and opinions (those who had strong opinions spent longer explaining them). With a handful of exceptions in which interviews were conducted later in the day by phone, most interviews were conducted in person.

This strategy has certain advantages: whereas door-to-door sampling might miss certain neighborhoods, pockets of voucher users, or types of people, all voucher tenants must visit the office to take care of at least some baseline administrative issues, meaning that all voucher tenants had some nonzero probability of being asked to participate in the study. However, a number of intervening forces distort that probability across members of the population. For example, voucher renters with worse experiences in the program may visit the office more often to resolve issues, and voucher tenants with strong concerns might be more willing to participate in the interview than voucher tenants who are satisfied with the program. These selection issues suggest a measured interpretation of the generalizability of findings. Findings in this article should be seen as identifying issues of

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the Antelope Valley, California: 2011–2015 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

	Palmdale	Lancaster
Population	156,466	159,774
White (%)	46.20	63.30
White only, not Hispanic or Latino (%)	22.40	33.80
Black or African American only (%)	15.40	21.30
Hispanic or Latino (any race, %)	57.30	38.20
Owner-occupied housing unit rate (%)	63.20	56.20
Median value of owner-occupied housing units (\$)	188,300	170,600
Median gross monthly rent (\$)	1,180	1,066
Total households	42,720	47,427
High school graduate or higher (percentage of persons age 25 years+)	74.20	81.40
Bachelor's degree or higher (percentage of persons age 25 years+)	14.80	15.10
Median household income (\$)	53,392	47,225
Persons in poverty (%)	21.30	23.50

Source. American Community Survey Demographic and Housing 5-Year Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau, 2015.

Table 2. Descriptive data for the voucher population in the Antelope Valley, California, 2012 and 2016.

	2012		2016	
	Lancaster	Palmdale	Lancaster	Palmdale
Totals				
Units reported	2,325	1,450	3,331	1,919
People per unit	3.1	3.1	3	3.2
People total	7,329	4,887	9,904	5,949
Financial characteristics				
Rent per month (\$)	401	405	398	398
Income per year (\$)	13,568	13,966	14,909	15,063
Household composition				
One adult with children (%)	56	60	53	52
Female headed (%)	89	89	85	86
Female headed with children (%)	58	64	54	54
Race/ethnicity				
Minority (%)	88	89	90	90
Black (%)	74	72	76	72
Hispanic (%)	14	16	13	18

Source. Picture of Subsidized Housing, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2012, 2016.

concern in the voucher program rather than establishing their prevalence among the population of voucher renters in this setting or across the program more generally.

Descriptive data about voucher renters in Lancaster and Palmdale are provided in [Table 2](#), illustrating the size of the population and its financial characteristics, household composition, and racial and ethnic composition. The population is generally poorer than private residents of the region are and is more heavily made up of Black tenants than the comparatively more White and more Latino and Hispanic valley.

Table 3. Descriptive data for all voucher renter respondents.

	Voucher respondents	
	Number	%
Gender		
Female	30	77
Male	9	23
Race/ethnicity ^a		
Black	32	82
White	4	10
Latino	2	5
Unknown	1	3
Location		
Lancaster	12	31
Palmdale	17	44
Lived in both, or other part of Antelope Valley	10	26
Time in Antelope Valley		
Less than 1 year	4	10
1–3 years	12	31
4–10 years	8	21
More than 10 years	9	23
Unknown	6	15
Origin neighborhood		
Los Angeles City	18	46
Los Angeles County	12	31
Outside Los Angeles County	6	15
Unknown	3	8
Children		
Has children	21	54
Total	39	100

Note. ^aThese are rough estimates based on incomplete reports by respondents and the author's observations, and should be treated as suggestive, but not definitive.

Source. Author's data.

Table 4. Places searched, items labeled, and people interpreted as violating housing authority rules.

Places	Items	People
Mailboxes	Toothbrushes	Partners
Closets	Clothes	Children/grandchildren
Drawers	Drivers' licenses	Nieces/nephews
Bathrooms	Cars	Adult family members

Source. Author's data.

Descriptive data about the respondents in this study are provided in Table 3. Just over three quarters of tenants I interviewed were women, and over four fifths were Black, in accord with broader trends in voucher usage in the county. Most voucher renter respondents live in either Lancaster or Palmdale, with some reporting having lived in both or living in other small cities in the Antelope Valley.

My interviews with these tenants were semistructured. They began with a set of motivating questions (relying on a common script for all interviews) focused on tenants' reasons for using the voucher program, motivations for moving to the region, economic well-being, and social experiences post move, including assessments of any backlash and policing tenants may have faced. Later in the interview, tenants were asked open-ended questions or to name issues they were facing, questions that allowed tenants to drive the direction of the interview and introduce new ideas and issues. To protect their privacy, tenants were not asked for personally identifying information such as names or addresses (all names used in this article are pseudonyms). Although this limited the possibility of follow-up, it created an atmosphere in which tenants were more willing to participate with less concern about their views triggering administrative or other forms of backlash. Similarly, to protect privacy, interviews did not ask about children, but when tenants brought up children in their own comments, follow-up questions were asked.

These data have important limitations, however. First, my positionality as non-Black, male, middle class, and not a resident of the Antelope Valley means that interviews were structured and unfolded in ways that would certainly be different from interviews conducted by individuals who share more of the characteristics and life experiences of voucher tenants themselves. Second, interview questions were not directed at family issues, or details of experiences with policing. The resulting data nevertheless contain many descriptions of these issues brought up at the initiative of respondents. Future research can intentionally ask these questions and go into more detail. Third, when discussing issues with the housing authority, neighbors, or police, many residents reported on what their friends or family members experienced. This is a logical outcome of the fact that many of those who had negative experiences with these authorities were evicted or pushed out of the area and would therefore not be contacted during fieldwork. Thus, only those who had not (or not yet) been evicted could respond to questions, and would therefore have a mix of their own difficulties and the secondhand experiences of others to relay. One serious drawback is that this means accounts are not complete and follow-up questions could not be asked of those other individuals.⁶ Fourth, because the accounts are from the perspective of tenants themselves, they may not always be able to clearly describe what is happening on the other side of interactions. It may be difficult to identify, for example, whether a spontaneous inspection was the product of a neighbor's complaint, housing authority action, or referral from another government entity.

Findings

Most respondents reported living in the valley for less than a decade, and 16 respondents, or 41%, had lived there for less than 3 years. All respondents started out living somewhere outside of the Antelope Valley and moved there because of or through the voucher program. Thirty respondents

(77%) moved to the valley from either the City of Los Angeles or somewhere else in Los Angeles County, with a smaller number moving from another part of California or outside the state. A number of factors helped determine their movement, including the supply of easily accessible voucher units, tenant preferences, economic circumstances, and the information available through their networks. For example, many individuals reported finding out about this program through family members and friends, or through administrators of their prior housing assistance programs (such as county public housing), and many reported knowing other voucher renters in the Antelope Valley prior to moving. It is often these figures who helped tenants get onto the waiting list and navigate the application process.

When asked why they chose to move, voucher tenants referenced a wide variety of primary motivations. Nine (23%) cited economic circumstances, such as the inability to find a landlord who would rent to them in other parts of the county. Eleven (28%) cited dissatisfaction with the city in areas such as safety and adequate living space, issues particularly important to voucher renters with children. Several residents, especially older ones, stated that they wanted to provide a stable environment for the children or grandchildren under their care, mentioning such desires as providing their child with their own bedroom or gaining access to a better school system in the Antelope Valley. Finally, seven respondents (29%) referenced family reasons or emergency circumstances to explain their movement decisions. Family members who already lived in the Antelope Valley were often extremely helpful in facilitating the move, especially under the emergency circumstances that individuals often found themselves in when receiving their voucher. Overall, respondents appear to have concluded that moving to the Antelope Valley was a practical way to find better housing, escape a neighborhood, or provide better conditions for their children.

However, although tenants broadly felt safe (often in comparison with prior housing in Los Angeles proper), tenants generally did not feel welcomed or comfortable in their new neighborhoods. These broad feelings of social exclusion form the general context of more specific experiences of punitive regulation tenants reported. I find that 30 of 39 (77%) of respondents experienced hostility or discrimination in housing, 16 (41%) felt it directly from a neighbor, and 23 (59%) experienced aggressive policing, including in the context of housing. These broad findings about barriers to social integration provide an important context for the findings outlined in this article, and track earlier findings (Kurwa, 2015).

In what follows, I turn to the responses of nine voucher respondents in my study to describe in more detail the effects of surveillance and policing on their personal, romantic, and family lives—what I see as the functional equivalent to the pre-1968 *man in the house* rules. Indeed, the reports of these tenants as well as their accounts of the experiences of their friends and family members suggest that present conditions may go further than early *man in the house* rules did in that they do not just restrict the relations between women and men; rather, they turn a much wider range of personal life, family, and social relations into eviction jeopardies. I begin by reviewing two relevant rules, discuss how they are enforced, and document their effects on tenants at the personal, romantic, family, and communal level.

Regulations Banning Unauthorized Tenants, Crime, and Drugs

Voucher renters in the Antelope Valley are overseen by the Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles (HACOLA). HACOLA's rules for voucher renters (framed as rules for families) contain two provisions that, although facially innocuous, have significant implications for these families. The first rule states that the family shall "[r]eport all changes in family composition . . . in writing within thirty (30) calendar days after the change." Later in its statement of family obligations the authority reiterates that the tenant may not "Allow unauthorized persons to reside in the dwelling unit." Finally, being found in violation can lead to eviction: "[f]ailure to report changes, making false reports

and/or allowing unauthorized people in the unit is cause for immediate termination from the program” (HACOLA, 1).

The second rule is related to crime and drugs. Families shall not

[e]ngage in drug-related criminal activity (including medical marijuana) or violent criminal activity on or near the premises of the unit, nor shall any guests or invitees of the family engage in drug-related criminal activity (including medical marijuana) or violent criminal activity on or near the premises of the unit. (HACOLA, 1)

As with the unauthorized tenant rule, failure to comply may lead to eviction.

What might seem like relatively simple and straightforward policies actually have significant implications for the lives of voucher renters. For, to really enforce these rules, the state has to peer deeply into the private lives of voucher renters and their families, and it does so through its power to inspect voucher tenant homes. For voucher tenants, abiding by the broadest interpretations of the housing authority’s rules maximizes the chance of not being found in violation and subsequently subject to eviction. This may be a product of trying to avoid the absolutely unacceptable outcome of eviction, as well as a sense of legal cynicism regarding the fairness of the program’s administration (Hitchens, Carr, & Clampet-Lundquist, 2018). To enact these precautions, tenants must take precautionary steps that largely involve minimizing contact with family members, not being able to provide care to loved ones, and ceasing activities that build family cohesion.

How Investigations Happen

As described earlier, there are two broad pathways by which an inspection may occur. The first is the regular Housing Quality Standards inspection, the product of housing authority rules that state that the authority may inspect a tenant’s home at what it describes as a reasonable time and with reasonable advance notice. The second broad category is what is exceptional to this case—an investigation that is triggered by either a neighbor’s complaint to the local housing authority, police, or municipal code enforcement, or some precipitating action by the latter two agencies (Ocen, 2012). Local residents surveil presumed voucher renters, with particular focus on their family practices and presumed criminality (Kurwa, 2015). The persistent and malicious social enforcement of housing authority rules by these neighbors functions as part of the broader matrix of social control faced by voucher renters. The role neighbors play in surveilling and filing complaints about voucher renters allows the formation of a two-step process by which neighbors surveil and file complaints with malicious and discriminatory intent, and the administration investigates and responds to each complaint in a nondiscriminatory manner. The discrimination is simply moved down to the private level, where it cannot easily be stopped, and then enforced at the public level. Some evidence of the scale of this policing is available: between FY 2007–2008 and FY 2009–2010, nearly as many calls were made to the Housing Authority’s fraud hotline against tenants in the Antelope Valley (916) as were made against tenants in the entire rest of Los Angeles County (1,007).

Even in interviews conducted after the height of this policing, tenants remain aware of their surveillance. One tenant, Sylvia, was part of a mixed-race household raising children. The family had moved to the Antelope Valley from Santa Clarita because they could not find a landlord willing to accept a Section 8 voucher there. She described how her family was surveilled as follows:

There’s something like—what is it? Not the policemen, the watchers. So for any little thing, they want to make a complaint, you know. They must want to get rid of us. They pretty much disagree with a lot of us that are on Section 8. You know, like I said, that’s because they think that we’re minimal or less of a person. . . .

Sylvia may be referring to her neighbors, given the reference to making complaints (and the term *watchers* may be a reference to neighborhood watch). Another tenant, Alicia, described the panoply of circumstances that could trigger a neighbor to file a complaint. In so doing, she illustrates the breadth of consideration she must take in her daily life to avoid being targeted for scrutiny:

They stare. They call the police for anything. Not on me but my neighbors across the street...they call the police on them, like, if they park their car in front of the mailbox, they call the police. That's ridiculous. They have too many cars in their driveway, they call the police. That ain't your business.

From the perspective of tenants, although it is hard to see exactly who is making complaints, or what is triggering the visits of various enforcement agencies, the motivations and messages being received are clear. What also seems clear is that these tenants, like the Medicaid recipients Bridges (2017) documents, do not enjoy a right to privacy. Their neighbors and the housing authority are able to surveil them as constantly and deeply as they wish. Compounding this is the sense among tenants that government agencies are collaborating. As Barbara, a tenant in her fifties, explains, “I have had some run-ins with the housing authority and police officers and they just take these databases and wind them together.” This perspective reflects what Virginia Eubanks (2018) calls the automation of inequality, or the use of data gathering and sharing by public and social service agencies to police and regulate poor people. Figure 2 aggregates these reports into a model of the paths by which tenants can experience housing authority inspections. These pathways are culled from tenant self-reports, and focus only on inspections by the housing authority, not on other types of inspection and enforcement actions by police or municipal code enforcement.

Private participation in the surveillance, policing, and regulation of those benefitting from the social safety net is not unique to this case. In mixed-income housing assistance programs, private renters socially police their federally assisted neighbors in the same building. And Gustafson (2013) has documented Riverside County, California’s advertisement of a financial reward for private reports of welfare fraud.

In the next sections I describe how tenants experience the enforcement of the unauthorized tenant and drug- and crime-free rules. I concatenate these experiences at the levels of tenants’ personal identities, romantic relationships, family lives, and ability to care for children. I show how this policing targets their family lives and makes them more difficult to sustain. I find that the combination of public and private surveillance and enforcement creates the housing voucher

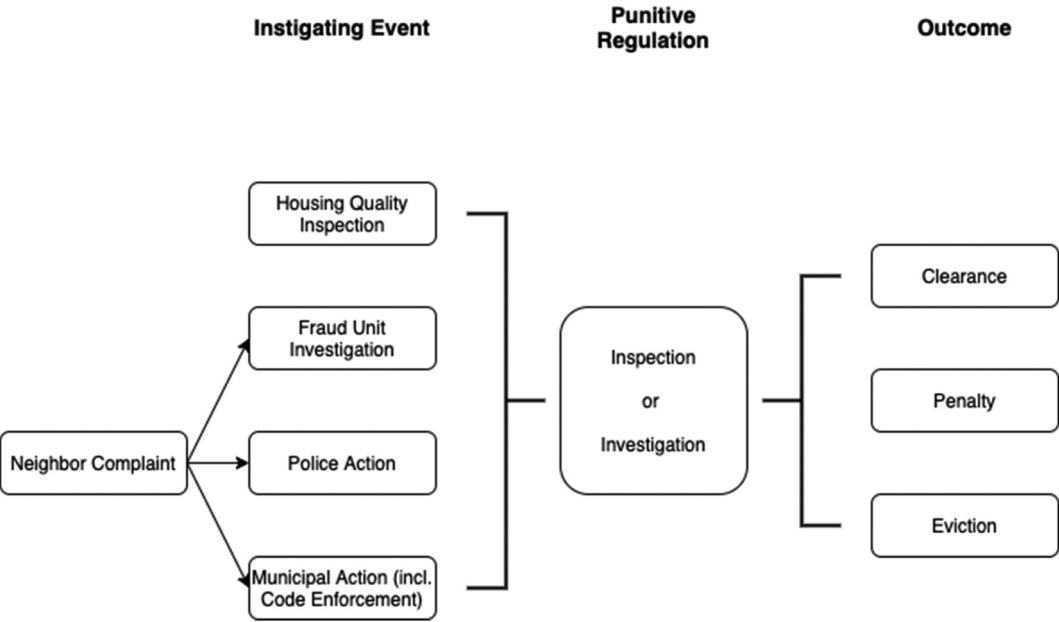


Figure 2. Pathways of housing inspections.

program's equivalent to the early inspection regimes used to enforce *man in the house* rules, and those that have continued to this day in health and human services programs. In every case, the incentives implicitly provided to tenants put personal and family life in tension with maintenance of safe and stable housing.

Family and Personal Bonds Jeopardized by the Policing of Vouchers

Personal Identities

Barbara used the voucher program to move from South Central Los Angeles to Lancaster roughly 11 years ago. In describing a housing investigation that she experienced soon after moving to her current home, Barbara reveals how the unauthorized tenant rule can be enforced in such a way as to target her own sexual identity and presentation of self:

[W]hen I first moved up here, they came to my house and brought the housing authority with them to my house, and because they were saying that a man lived in my house. Well, a man don't live in my house. I'm actually a lesbian. So yes...that's my stuff. And so my owner had to tell them, "Yeah. She's a lesbian. I knew when I rented to her. This is how she came to me. This is her appearance when she came to me. So I know..."

Barbara's experience—likely one conducted by a fraud investigator rather than a routine housing quality inspection—reveals much about the experience of voucher regulation. To fully determine whether a tenant is harboring an unauthorized tenant, the housing authority gives itself permission not just to enter a home but to peer into the closets of its tenants. This depth of investigation can turn into degradation ceremonies focused on questioning and litigating the minutiae of a tenant's life and home possessions (Gustafson, 2013). In this case, the state's presumption of heteronormativity means that it interprets the presence of male-presenting clothing in her closet as *prima facie* evidence that she is harboring a male unauthorized tenant in her home. Even when she explains that the male-presenting clothes are in fact part of her own wardrobe, it is not sufficient to be believed. Barbara had to convince her landlord to testify on her behalf so she would not be evicted because of the clothes she wears. The level of power this gives the landlord is significant. If a landlord held discriminatory views on the basis of race or sexuality, or even simply wished to rent to another tenant, he or she might just as easily have declined to offer that testimony.

From this policing of a tenant's self-presentation, conducted through a search of a closet, we can zoom out to see how tenants' relationships with others are recoded from ordinary parts of human social life to transgressions worthy of surveillance and possibly eviction.

Romantic Relationships

Whereas for Barbara, the closet becomes a site of vulnerability, for her sister it is the mailbox that makes her susceptible to eviction. As Barbara explains, her sister was evicted because a housing inspector found a piece of mail addressed to someone not authorized to live in her home.

She was a lesbian also, but she had a girlfriend. And the girlfriend just happened to be there. And the girlfriend [was] using her address for a mailing address. The girlfriend didn't live there, but they took her voucher because of that. Just because of that.

Even though the girlfriend did not live in the home, the fact that she used the address to receive mail functioned as sufficient proof for the voucher holder to be evicted. In this case, mail addressed to someone other than the registered voucher renter is a cause for belief that the tenant is engaged in voucher fraud through harboring an unauthorized tenant. The personal relationship is thus transformed into an eviction liability.

This anecdote reveals not just the depth of inspection that tenants are subject to—the contents of one's mailbox—but also the types of survival methods for poor communities that are rendered off-limits to voucher tenants. Mail addressed to someone other than the voucher tenant could arrive because a tenant is housing an unauthorized tenant or for a number of other reasons: it could be

misdirected, addressed to the previous resident; or the tenant could be receiving mail for another person as a form of social support, such as to assist someone during a period of homelessness or insecure housing. In seeking to prevent unauthorized residency, the program may also be penalizing others who are not housing unauthorized residents.

Romantic relationships can be disrupted by policing in other ways. Keisha is a middle-aged mother who had been using a voucher since 2007. During our conversation she explained her feeling of being spied upon by neighbors and explained that her sister had experienced similar surveillance. She then described the experience of a friend who lost her voucher simply because her boyfriend possessed a copy of her address when he was pulled over by police. She explained,

I had a friend who her boyfriend had her address—just like used her address. He didn't live there, he got like pulled over, I think he had drugs in his car and they like went like take her to court to take her Section 8 and all type of things because of something he did outside of the home.

Author: And he just happened to have her address like—

Keisha: Right but you're not supposed to have other people staying with you so I mean, she said he didn't live with her but she let [him use her address]. But they never said you can't, that's just like if I have a uncle that's homeless and he says, "Hey can I use your address for a mailing address?" That doesn't mean he necessarily lives with me because he used my address as a mailing address you know?

Whereas Keisha is sharing secondhand information, and thus further details of the incident cannot be acquired, the phenomenon she is describing (and which she understands as applicable to her own life) is that valid reasons to allow another person to use one's address can become eviction liabilities if they are read as evidence of unauthorized tenancy, or in combination with the program's drug-free rules. As each of these anecdotes suggests, tenants find their romantic relationships scrutinized by the public-private regime of voucher regulation, and this scrutiny can turn those relationships into eviction liabilities.

Family Relationships

Whereas tenants' selves and romantic relationships are affected by the invasive enforcement of unauthorized tenant and crime and drug free rules, these rules also extend to tenants' family lives—their ability to maintain family relations and to provide care for loved ones and children. Barbara explains the calculations that arise from the way visitors are policed:

It's like, if I have family visiting, and they decide they want to come over, and they might see [a] family member's toothbrush, or they might see a family member's car. Their whole assumption will go into, "Oh, you have a nonauthorized tenant..." They just pick at that.

Whether prompted by a neighbor's complaint or other police action, these searches put voucher tenants in severe jeopardy because any evidence that can be read as suggestive of an unauthorized tenant will be read in that manner. And the range of a tenant's life that is under scrutiny is extremely wide—it includes cars parked outside, and inside the house even an extra toothbrush in the bathroom can be read as evidence of a violation. While expressing all the ways that she might be vulnerable to eviction, Barbara contextualizes these threats in the case of having family visiting. Inviting family members over to share a meal, spend time together, or any other regular family activity might trigger a complaint that could lead to an inspection, and that inspection might read any evidence of a temporary family visit as evidence of a more permanent unauthorized resident. In making family bonds an eviction liability, the housing authority makes it substantially more difficult for voucher tenants to invite family members over, reducing family ties or forcing them to be maintained outside of the voucher renter's home.

Perhaps the most important consequence of this regulation is for children. The search for unauthorized tenants is not just about partners, spouses, or other adults—in the case of Andrea, a long-time resident of the Antelope Valley, it also extends to questioning the legitimacy of her own

children and exposing them to traumatic circumstances. She describes a surprise investigation as follows,

They came into my house like we were—I have no record. I’ve never been in trouble. You know, nothing major with my then-teenager, high school kids... But they came in with shotguns. They came in in vests. They came in in riot gear, and they held guns on us like we were wanted criminals. They surrounded my house...

Andrea continued by narrating her conversation with what appeared to be fraud investigators accompanied by police. She recounts the interaction and ways she tried to decline consent to the search but was eventually persuaded to give way:

Well, this is what they told me. They said I had been randomly selected for a compliance check, it’s called... So when the man knocked at the door I could see his badge, and I’m like “Why are you here? I have a reinspection tomorrow.” I was expecting him, but the next day, he goes “Oh, you’ve been selected for reinspection—I mean for a compliance check.” And I said, “Why are all these police here?” My heart was beating so fast it was about to bust out of my chest. He said, “They’re with me.” And I said, “Well, you can come in. I don’t have nothing to hide, but they can’t come in. They don’t have a warrant and they’re not coming in here.” He told me “If they don’t come in, then you’re going to lose your Section 8. They go where I go.” And I said, “Well, why do you need all these people just for me? It’s nothing but me and the kids here.” [He responded,] “Well, that’s up to us to figure out.”

After describing her unsuccessful attempts to decline consent to armed officers entering her home, she describes the search as follows:

They’re looking. And when I say they looked, they did a massive search on my house. They went in my drawers. They held guns on my kids. They went in my kitchen drawers. In my son’s drawer. They pulled out an ID and some money and said bam—threw it across the table at me and said “Hah, who is this?” That’s what the officer said. Yeah. We got her. Who is this? I said that’s my son. He’s on my contract, and that’s a little change from his Walmart job. What? And he said “Oh yeah, yeah. She’s right.”

These investigations fit Gustafson’s (2013) analysis of degradation ceremonies used to shame and express disgust toward the poor. In Andrea’s retelling, she highlights not just the violence of housing investigations but also the investigators’ thrill in finding what they believe is evidence of an unauthorized tenant—a reason to evict Andrea. Their disappointment in learning that she had proper documentation of his authorization to live in the home is clear from the dejected manner in which they concede that she is right. Although Andrea was not evicted, the trauma of the experience, and the fact that her children were forced to experience it as well, serves as a form of punishment itself. And the search also functions to convey an implicit message: You are always a few pieces of paperwork away from eviction and may be searched at any time.

In Andrea’s case, her child was read as an unauthorized tenant. But children may also be read as violating crime- and drug-free housing rules. Although the rules that tenants agree to are rather narrowly written—tenants and family members may not engage in crimes or drug-related activity on the premises—in reality it appears that the rules are interpreted in such a way that family members with crime or drug use in their personal histories are effectively unable to reside with voucher renters. This may be the way the rules are interpreted, a result of other rules prevailing on voucher renters, or because of tenants’ expansive interpretations of these rules as a way to ensure that they stay safe from eviction. Barbara described her sister’s experience when her child, a minor, was caught shoplifting:

Like, my sister, she lost her Section 8 voucher... My sister, her daughter was 13 and got into some trouble for shoplifting, or something like that. So they were telling her, “Well, you can’t have her here, because she’s on probation. You can’t have her here because of this. She’s on gang files, and duh, duh, duh, duh, duh.” She said, “Well [what am] I supposed to do with my 13-year-old daughter?”

Here, in the context of shoplifting committed by a minor, the implementation of housing authority rules yet again forces a parent to either break up her family or lose housing support. A parent is effectively prevented from educating and guiding their child through their early teenage years when behavior like shoplifting is common.

Janae is a younger voucher renter who had moved to the Antelope Valley after experiencing housing discrimination in Long Beach. In the valley, however, she described her sister having problems stemming from the police rather than the housing authority:

She has had police harass her. Yeah, she has had police harassment due to my nephew getting in trouble, but it was like once everything was clear, they still continued to pop up at her house. They still continued to drive by her house daily. If there was a younger suspect in that same neighborhood that they felt hung out with my nephews, they would come to her house again.

The implications of police conspicuously monitoring a voucher tenant's home are significant. Low-income tenants, particularly women, experience landlord backlash if they are associated with police presence (Desmond & Valdez, 2013). Other tenants described police visits, even ones requested by voucher tenants themselves, as liabilities in the eyes of the housing authority. Similar dynamics may attach to Janae's sister as well. Tania, a tenant who generally had more positive experiences than others in the study, nevertheless relayed the experience of her grandmother, who was evicted because of something her young grandchildren had done:

So it's really hard for her not to have any—to be taking away her Section 8, not give her a chance, because of something that some young kids did or something that somebody else did; she didn't have no control over it, and they take it away from her.

Even after a child has served time and been released from prison, parents still feel they cannot invite them into their homes for fear of a housing inspection that might evict them. Unlike the contexts of welfare and child services, where one's criminal background or drug use might render one ineligible to receive support or retain custody of one's children, in the voucher program a child's infractions may jeopardize a parent's access to housing (Roberts, 2009). Barbara expresses these concerns in the context of a son on parole being unable to visit her home:

And it's one more other issue that I have with also housing authority, and also the society up here. For instance, if I have a son that went to prison, and my son got out of prison, and I'm his only family, do you know, my son could not come to my house because he's on parole?

Above, I illustrated how tenants felt they could not invite family over for fear of those family members being seen, triggering a complaint, and leading to an inspection that would label them unauthorized residents. Here, this mother worries her son cannot visit her because his presence might violate the crime-free rules of the housing authority. If there was a surprise inspection while he was visiting, there could be serious consequences leading to eviction.

Communal Support

In the cases documented above, tenants described their or their family members' experiences with being wrongly accused of harboring an unauthorized resident. But in some cases, a voucher renter might take in a family member or friend in knowing contravention. DeAndre, an early middle-aged father, relayed knowledge of a case in which his friends were evicted after they knowingly violated the housing authority's rules by opening their home to someone in financial distress.

I know two friends of mine that were incarcerated because extra people there in their house and they got incarcerated. You know, I'm not saying [the Housing Authority] weren't right, but I'm just saying.

Author: They got incarcerated for it? Not just taken away, not just their voucher taken away?

DeAndre: No, not the voucher taken away. I guess they had extra—I guess they was being investigated for a long time. You know, not saying they were right. You know, having extra people live there, but sometimes the economy is so bad, you've got to do what you've got to do. Not saying break the law, you know.

Housing family members or close friends is a common strategy for weathering financial crises. Although it is a mode of caregiving that is denied to voucher renters, some choose to prioritize it over and above the rules imposed by the program. This type of choice is not restricted to an unauthorized resident in the home; it also extends to family members with drug- or crime-related troubles.

Stepping back from individual cases to the aggregate experiences of voucher renters in this study, I use Table 4 to list all the places that respondents mention as being searched, all the items used to suggest the presence of an unauthorized tenant, and all types of people whose presence is questioned in the home of a voucher renter. Looking at these data together, one can see how pervasive surveillance is, and how many tripwires exist around voucher tenants. From a tenant's drawers and closets to the presence of cars outside their homes, they have little control over their physical space and no right to privacy that they can exercise. Items that plausibly can have multiple meanings and uses are nevertheless potentially interpreted in the most dangerous ways—as evidence of rule-breaking that might precipitate eviction.

Consequences

The experiences of eight tenants quoted in the findings above (20% of the original study sample), and the experiences of five additional family members and friends that they relayed, suggest that at minimum, a demonstrable minority of voucher tenants is experiencing the regulation of the voucher program in highly punitive ways.

But in addition to evidence around the experience of punitive regulation, I also find evidence of these policies' consequences, including on tenants' sense of citizenship and their life choices. Barbara highlights how the scrutiny of her voucher status by the housing authority and police leads her to feel unable to call the police if she felt she needed to:

Whenever the police is called to your house they log it, and tell Section 8, and you got too many police calls. So I can't call the police if I'm having a problem? Wow. It's just like that. It's just like that.

Her calls for service might be used as part of a record against her for having had police dispatched to her house too many times. This phenomenon is echoed in research outside of the voucher context as well, echoing Desmond and Valdez (2013) finding that calling municipal services for assistance with issues such as domestic violence often leads poor women to be evicted by their landlords for causing disturbances in the form of a police presence.

Whereas Barbara mentions not being able to access police if she needed assistance, Andrea described a constant fear of police stemming from her experience with a traumatic search of her home:

I think differently about the knock on the door now. I'm terrified. Like are they going to take my children? I don't have children now. So why am I still so scared that it's bam, bam, bam on the door? ... Is this the police? They've got to have a search warrant, but for me they don't.

Both Barbara and Andrea express a sense of diminished citizenship and rights as voucher tenants—lacking the right to access a municipal service such as police if they wished to or lacking the right to refuse entry to police without a search warrant.

Elsewhere I have documented how tenants navigate the climate of surveillance and policing by being less visible in their neighborhood in an attempt to draw less scrutiny (Kurwa, 2015). Some tenants describe feeling like they cannot have family over, telling family that they cannot stay, or creating arrangements whereby they drive to other parts of Los Angeles to see family members whom they otherwise could not safely see in the Antelope Valley. These strains lead some to consider leaving the program despite its financial benefits. Lakisha, a younger voucher renter, described her thoughts about the choices she faced:

Lakisha: I'm gonna be honest and tell you the truth. I'm thinking about moving back to the city about—maybe next year—a year or two.

Author: How come?

Lakisha: I'm thinking about it. First of all, I miss my family and it get lonely up here.... Like I don't even know nobody. I stay to myself.

Author: Yeah. Yeah, that's hard.

Lakisha: And that's the best way to be.

Earlier in this article I documented the family and social consequences of the way housing authority regulations are enforced. These include not being able to have family or friends visit the home, and fearing that a second car in the driveway, second toothbrush on the bathroom counter-top, identification cards belonging to other people, or clothes that do not fit heteronormative expectations of their owners would be interpreted as evidence of an unauthorized tenant. Alternatively, children, friends and family members who have some level of involvement with the criminal justice system are also transformed into liabilities for voucher renters. All of these dangers translate into the clear impetus to minimize social and family relations to protect housing. They also translate into a diminished belief in one's right to services, as Barbara demonstrates, and they drive others, like Lakisha, to consider leaving.

Conclusion: Regulating Families, From AFDC to Housing Choice Vouchers

Over 50 years after the *man in the house* rules were struck down by the courts, the experiences of voucher renters in the Antelope Valley echo the experiences of tenants in Pruitt-Igoe. Indeed, they suggest that when municipalities and housing authorities choose to, they can use existing regulatory frameworks to replicate the same type of family punishment that is now recognized as a scourge in other areas of the social safety net. If the governing logic behind the punitive turn in social welfare programs is race and gender animus, it is not surprising that the same would hold true for instances of punitive regulation in housing assistance, as programs like vouchers have become raced and gendered in a similar way. Whereas welfare policing occurs through intense surveillance by the state (or sometimes corporate contractors), in the arena of the voucher program this occurs both by the state and by private citizens. Finally, although the consequences for poor people on welfare include benefit sanctions, denial of benefits, and fraud prosecution, the central threat to voucher tenants is voucher termination (although fraud prosecution is also possible). This model would be of a piece with trends identified in other housing contexts—particularly in public housing but also in the criminalization of homelessness and the increased use of banishment to remove poor people from public space (Bonnet, 2019; Foscarinis, Cunningham-Bowers, & Brown, 1999; Roy, 2017).

Although this case illustrates how the punitive regulation of vouchers operates, it cannot speak to the prevalence of such practices across larger geographies. Although there is evidence that similar practices have occurred throughout the state of California during the same time period, and although broader studies of the response to Black migration have suggested that policing and punishment are a central part of that response, this study's most salient contributions are as a warning to policymakers and as a starting point for researchers. Furthermore, because data in this article are drawn from only nine of 39 interviews, and most of these respondents were women, it cannot fully capture how these processes may impact men, or how men's and women's experiences compare. Finally, further research that can follow up with friends and family members when they are referenced by respondents would strengthen and deepen these findings, as well as better measure the ripple effect of one household's experiences on the experiences of other tenants.

For municipal policymakers, this case may suggest the consequences of adopting the punitive regulation schemes studied here, even if they are framed in neutral terms. For housing authority administrators, the case may illustrate the dangers of sharing tenant data with police agencies. For housing advocates, it may help draw links between tenant social experiences and the underlying

regulatory processes that may be driving them, and it might also encourage the inclusion of voucher terminations in reform agendas combatting evictions. Finally, for all those interested in housing policy, this case may highlight the lasting consequences of punitive regulation on the privacy, and personal and family lives, of voucher tenants.

For researchers, this case might suggest new lines of investigation. First, research into the rate of calls to housing authority fraud hotlines, the relationship between voucher movement and such calls, and the geography of voucher terminations could fill important gaps in understanding the role of regulation in voucher tenant experiences and socioeconomic outcomes. Second, more work could be done to explore the consequences for LGBTQ voucher renters, as the experiences of tenants like Barbara in this study suggest that they face a higher level of scrutiny and precarity as a result of public–private surveillance and policing. Third, researchers might examine whether and how analogous policies operate in public housing, and in mixed-income redevelopments. Evidence of the malicious use of antiloitering laws (Veklerov, 2018), unlawful data sharing between housing authorities and police departments (Ohl, 2017), and extreme modes of surveillance suggest the urgency of this line of research (Gross, 2018). Fourth, tracing the consequences of these forms of regulation could include finding out what happens to evicted tenants, a population not covered by this survey but one which could explicate the full social consequences of such a policing regime.

Notes

1. Landlords in depressed housing markets have strong economic incentives to rent to voucher holders, first because these tenants would ensure a higher fair market reimbursement rate than the depressed rental market would provide, and second because these tenants represent steady and guaranteed rental payments, as opposed to private renters whose insecure employment and income might make them miss rental payments or unable to complete their rental terms. These logics fit broader work by Garboden, Rosen, DeLuca, and Edin (2018) and Rosen (2014).
2. For example, the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles has a Section 8 Investigations Unit, detailed at <https://home.hacla.org/s8investigations>.
3. *The Community Action League et al. v. City of Lancaster and City of Palmdale* (2011).
4. *The Community Action League et al. v. City of Lancaster and City of Palmdale* (2011), and Lancaster City Council Minutes of June 10, 2008.
5. See, for example, discussions on public forums: <https://www.city-data.com/forum/california/480-moving-palmdale-ca-questions.html> and <https://www.city-data.com/forum/los-angeles/262009-renting-section-8-family-palmdale-ca.html#post12741015>
6. Because the experiences of these friends and family members are being relayed through the respondent, it is possible that this extra step introduces error into the understanding of their circumstances. But even in cases in which respondents incorrectly believe that their friends or family were evicted through voucher regulation, the belief itself is suggestive of a wider social consequence that is of research importance. An erroneous belief that spread throughout a community can have chilling effects on community members and lead them to change the way they live their lives out of an abundance of caution.

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