



**Eva Rosen**, *The Voucher Promise: “Section 8” and the Fate of an American Neighborhood*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780691172569 (cloth); ISBN: 9780691189505 (ebook)

Commonly understood as a government program that undoes and at the very least prevents residential segregation, the Housing Choice Voucher Program provides low-income Americans the chance to rent a home of their choosing. Choice, though, is not simple nor is it fair, as Eva Rosen shows and explains why in *The Voucher Promise: “Section 8” and the Fate of an American Neighborhood*. Rosen’s ethnographic study zooms in on Baltimore, Maryland, beginning in 2011, though never neglects Baltimore’s historical status as a classic rust belt center. Park Heights, the Baltimore neighborhood under study, is “predominately black” with a poverty rate “typical of the kinds of neighborhoods to which voucher holders move across the country” (p.32). The perspectives of Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) recipients, renters, longtime Baltimore homeowners, and landlords are taken into account, ultimately demonstrating that improving the HCV program is not simply a matter of scaling it up.

Rosen thoroughly and openly addresses questions that are necessary to discuss for those interested in affordable housing solutions and geographies of exclusion. For instance, how can the HCV program maximize landlord participation and give recipients not simply a sense of “choice” but instead an honest experience of overall stability? (p.250). How do black homeowners explain and respond to the steady rise of HCV holders on their block? *The Voucher Promise* stands out because Rosen directly confronts – and works with instead of against – the likely reality that private-sector involvement in affordable housing solutions is here to stay. She also directly and sensitively describes the conflict that exists among people of a similar class standing and those of the same race. Through observations and interviews with 102 people, Rosen convincingly makes the case that modifications to the rental assistance program under study can and should be made.

Through an outcomes-centered approach, Rosen argues that “vouchers are not the problem” (p.246), but critical limitations must be addressed if the “choice” of recipients is to be

fully realized. In 1998, the HCV program became an expansion of the Section 8 Certificate Program originally founded under the Housing Act of 1974 (p.14). Public housing authorities provide a voucher to qualifying applicants that they may leverage in the private-sector housing market within their municipality, an agreement where residents spend approximately 30 percent of their income on rent with the remainder paid to the landlord by the municipality's public housing authority. Rosen's study centers the Housing Authority of Baltimore City. Traditional public housing developments, commonly known for their high-rise design, have regularly stood in under-resourced neighborhoods. Families, accordingly, face a range of concerns including underperforming public schools and high rates of crime and violence that many would argue are caused by high rates of unemployment. Many of Baltimore's high-rise towers were demolished in the 1990s (p.133), and HCVs are meant to give residents a chance to live in a different neighborhood. It is well known that limitations are written into HCV agreements between the public housing authority and the recipient; for instance, qualified units must be "under the local Fair Market Rent" (p.99), and new voucher holders have 60 days to find a fitting home. What Rosen finds puzzling, however, is that many HCV recipients rent in under-resourced communities even though there are qualified rental units in "better" neighborhoods. Rosen asks, why is it that given the choice to live in communities of different kinds, recipients find themselves in the ones they have often sought to leave?

In Chapter 5, Rosen centers landlord profiles gathered during her ethnographic research to answer why it is, aside from the deadlines and rules of the voucher, HCV recipients rent in under-resourced neighborhoods. She reveals that there are landlords who deliberately attract voucher holders and landlords who do not, and, most importantly, that both sets of private-sector actors measurably control which neighborhoods voucher recipients live in. Some landlords specifically seek voucher recipients to fill vacancies in less popular, resource-poor neighborhoods by offering upgraded amenities in units. These units and their fixtures and fittings are colloquially called "mousetraps" (p.153). In "better" neighborhoods, where landlords can with ease attract tenants who are able to pay rent without a voucher, a landlord might increase the rent slightly to set it above the local Fair Market Rent so voucher recipients no longer qualify

for the landlord's unit. Rosen finds that the choice in Housing Choice Vouchers is influenced both by landlords who are receptive to vouchers because they have units that are difficult to rent, and by landlords who refuse vouchers because their units are located in more desirable, well-resourced neighborhoods. By getting to know 20 landlords through conversation and observation over the course of her study, Rosen introduces readers to a "specialist" (p.145) class of landlords who have developed a preference for HCV recipients as potential renters, and an "incentive structure" (p.134) used by landlords to entice them. Because there is a "specialist" landlord who often lures voucher recipients into under-resourced neighborhoods, Rosen suggests that the issue at hand is more about why landlords are willing to rent in certain locations within a city, than about a deficient housing stock and what is to be done about it.

Landlords frequently want to fill vacancies in difficult-to-rent neighborhoods, a status often caused by high crime rates or recently reported acts of violence. The reasons landlords are able to continue luring voucher recipients into these neighborhoods are various, but include an information gap where recipients are not made aware of their options by housing authorities, so voucher holders often settle on the first unit that they find. Further, Rosen shows how the government can regulate the rental market to provide low-income renters with greater choice. While the tactics used by some landlords to lure in HCV recipients are downright alarming, Rosen convincingly demonstrates that changes can be made. Rosen, for example, interviews Jim Lewis who runs a "tenant placement agency" (p.151) that matches HCV recipients with hard-to-rent units. Lewis' strategy is to "chauffer tenants directly from their current homes to the doorstep of the available property" (ibid.), luring voucher recipients into recently modernized homes in neighborhoods with high crime rates by not presenting HCV recipients a full picture of the block. Rosen argues that if HCV recipients received more guidance and information about listings from their housing authority, they may be able to avoid the "mousetraps".

Insider knowledge of landlord motivations and strategy does not come without concrete recommendations in *The Voucher Promise*, provided succinctly in the conclusion. A lesson I drew from Rosen's analysis is that despite the individual motivations of landlords, equitable changes in affordable housing are possible because many of the roadblocks are policy based even

when the private-sector gets involved. With the demolition of traditional public housing developments across the US within the past couple of decades, low-income Americans eligible for HCV assistance find themselves in the following conundrum: private-sector rental units are often nicer and up to code, yet HCV recipients encounter both landlords who won't accept their voucher and landlords who deceptively lure them into modernized units, and also often confront resistance from current residents. To keep the system in check, Rosen offers a few recommendations. One is for public housing authorities. Rosen argues that public housing authorities can help recipients make "informed decisions" by "providing housing information, counseling, transportation to help families explore new neighborhoods, and offering security deposit assistance" (p.248), effectively avoiding many of the traps set by landlords. If HCV recipients are lured into under-resourced neighborhoods, they are also turned away from affluent neighborhoods due to landlord fears that a phenomenon known as "flipping the neighborhood" (p.162) will occur, for one. Rosen recommends "national legislation making it illegal to discriminate against someone who pays their rent with a voucher" (p.251), rolling out the legislation passed in 2019 by Baltimore City Council.

A significant contribution of *The Voucher Promise* is that it is helpful for understanding Baltimore's housing stock not simply in terms of the quantity of available units, but on the terms of longtime residents who own or rent. Rosen's chapter on "receiving neighborhoods" (p.165), where the perspective of black working-class longtime residents is centered, opens up new lines of inquiry for researchers, including what can be done about Baltimore's neighborhoods that would benefit both homeowners and renters. Rosen supplies several recommendations in her conclusion, one being "Community Development Block Grants to help revitalize neighborhoods and preserve affordable housing stock" (p.254). Another question is, how might progressive-minded researchers approach public-private partnerships at public housing authorities in the face of movements to "de-commodify" housing? With proposals like Senator Bernie Sanders' "Housing for All" plan that includes national rent control and an expansion of the HCV (or "Section 8") program, it's crucial that scholars consider the changing roles of both government and the private sector.

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Rosen's book begins with a clear explanation of the HCV program and introduces readers to the limits of the affordable housing market. The aftermath of the Great Migration and the history of Park Heights through a "folk theory of decline" are located in the first chapter. The second chapter is vital for understanding why HCVs offer tremendous "relief" (p.62) to recipients through stories of those who have lost their voucher. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the "promise" and "challenges" of HCVs. Landlord profiles are provided in the fifth chapter, showing that both overt and structural racism coexist in the private housing market. The sixth chapter is most original, and in it Rosen describes the perspective of neighbors in receiving neighborhoods who like many homeowners across the country want to preserve their property values, ultimately demonstrating the complexity of Park Heights. The seventh chapter provides the reader with a sense of closure with mention of many interlocutors introduced earlier on. In this chapter, Rosen offers a compelling and important distinction between "moving up" and "moving on". While many scholars and policy makers focus on upward mobility, which Rosen acknowledges is important, she suggests that the vouchers for many are about moving "on" from instability even if they are not moving "up" in so doing.

*The Voucher Promise* is an excellent model for policy researchers for both its depth and its clarity. One could easily take the variables in Rosen's study – tenant needs, existing housing stock, motivations of landlords, perspectives of longtime homeowners – to begin locating weaknesses in HCV programs across the country. Rosen makes the stakes of rental assistance known through in-depth interviews with HCV recipients and those who would benefit greatly from a voucher if the housing authority granted them one. Plus, she offers a clear map of the existing housing stock that surrounds HCV recipients, specifically the investments of all involved. I most appreciated Rosen's ability to make a complex web of social relationships and policy decisions tangible and concrete, never obscured by academic theory but clearly informed by it.

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# ANTIPODE

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