The Other Side of the Story: Exploring the Experiences of Housing Choice Voucher Landlords as a way to improve the stability of Low-Income Households and Communities

Project Synopsis

Project participants:
This project engages landlords who rent to lower income households in the Pittsburgh region.

Community partner organizations:
- Gale Schwartz from the Housing Alliance of Southwestern Pennsylvania
- Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh

CETR faculty
- PI: Anita Zuberi, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology
- Students: Alicia McAllister, MA Candidate, Social & Public Policy; Megan Winner, BA, Sociology ('17); Brittany Urban, MA Candidate, Social & Public Policy

This study explores the experiences of landlords renting to low-income households, many who participate in the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, familiarly known as “Section 8.” As housing policy for low-income households has shifted away from large-scale public housing developments into vouchers that participants use to find housing in the private market, landlords end up playing a vital role in the lives of low-income renters. These landlords are now responsible for handling issues that arise, such as late rent and domestic problems, and how they handle them can have important implications for the well-being of tenants. Although some research highlights the importance of landlords in shaping the residential trajectories of low-income renters by either encouraging them to stay or forcing them to move (Boyd et al., 2006; DeLuca et al., 2013; Desmond, 2016; Rosen; 2014), these studies are almost all focused on the renter’s perspective. As a result, I am collecting and analyzing qualitative data through focus groups and in-depth interviews to understand the landlord’s perspective. What issues do landlords struggle with most (e.g., late rent; illegal activity)? Second, what strategies are in place for addressing these issues? How successful are these strategies and what other barriers remain? How do other, especially smaller, landlords handle these issues? What are landlord’s experiences (good and bad) with the Housing Choice Voucher program? In addition, I am using quantitative data to examine what communities have a higher concentration of HCV participants, and what neighborhood characteristics are associated with having a concentration of housing vouchers.

• Benefits
Answering these questions has important implications for housing policy for low-income households, especially in Pittsburgh area where we are experiencing changes that are threatening to decrease the supply of naturally occurring affordable housing. Understanding what issues landlords are struggling and targeting resources towards these issues can improve the experiences of current landlords in the HCV program and encourage others to participate. Not only could this improve the well-being of low-income individuals by providing stable and higher quality housing, but it can be beneficial to the communities where vouchers are being used by reducing residential turnover and improving housing conditions.

• Challenges
Connecting with and engaging landlords is challenging. There is no list of landlords of lower income households that currently exists in the city. I have benefitted greatly from working with
my community partners, who are currently working with landlords, to gain access to this population. Also, building trust with landlords is a challenge. These are individuals who are more often than not publicized in a negative light. Being honest and open about my intentions has helped me engage those who are interested in the study.

- **Outcomes**
  - **Focus groups:** Conducted with the Housing Alliance of Southwestern Pennsylvania in fall 2017 to understand challenges faced by landlords renting to low income households.
  - **Mapped quantitative data on subsidized housing** by census tract in Allegheny County.
  - **Created a database of literature** on landlords, subsidized housing, and communities.
  - **In-depth Interviews:** Currently conducting in-depth interviews with landlords.
  - **Housing Alliance Report:** “How to Create Win-Win Partnerships with Landlords: A Set of Recommendations for Allegheny County” (Winter 2017). On February 15th, 2017, local housing practitioners were invited to a release of the report that resulted from the Housing Alliance’s research and focus group findings. I was part of a panel (along with members of DHS, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, and a local landlord) to discuss the report findings. Link to report here: [https://housingalliancepa.org/report-release-creating-win-win-partnerships-with-landlords/](https://housingalliancepa.org/report-release-creating-win-win-partnerships-with-landlords/)
  - **Passage of Landlord Risk Mitigation Fund:** The focus group findings were instrumental in the development of a landlord risk mitigation fund, which was recently funded in Pittsburgh to encourage landlords to participate in the subsidized housing programs. It will offer landlords who are part of subsidized housing programs funded by DHS the ability to apply for funds to repair any extensive property damage that is caused by tenants. The following newspaper article details the fund: [http://www.postgazette.com/local/city/2017/05/13/Allegheny-County-fund-would-encourage-more-landlords-to-rent-to-subsidized-tenants/stories/201705130018](http://www.postgazette.com/local/city/2017/05/13/Allegheny-County-fund-would-encourage-more-landlords-to-rent-to-subsidized-tenants/stories/201705130018)
  - **CommUNITY: The Power of People in Action,** the seventh annual Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group’s (PCRG) Community Development Summit. On May 25th, 2017, I was part of the session: “Creating Win-Win Partnerships with Landlords” organized by the Housing Alliance, and included a partner from Allegheny County’s DHS, Bureau of Homeless Services (Chuck Keenan). I presented focus group findings focused on the challenges of providing subsidized housing in Pittsburgh. This conference targets local practitioners in area of community development at the local and state levels.
  - The **Eviction Workgroup** led by the **Pittsburgh Foundation:** In fall 2016, following the release of the award winning book, *Evicted*, by Harvard Sociologist Mathew Desmond, the Pittsburgh Foundation convened a group of local housing experts and practitioners to discuss the issue of eviction in Pittsburgh. I was invited to be part of this group, and have included questions about eviction into my interviews as a result.