

Do Landlords Accept Housing Choice Vouchers?

Findings from Washington, DC

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15%

of landlords in DC refused to accept vouchers

14%

of landlords in DC accept vouchers conditionally or were unsure of their voucher policy

The denial rate was substantially lower in DC compared with sites without source-of-income protections.

DC was the only site where denial rates were the same in low- and high-poverty neighborhoods.

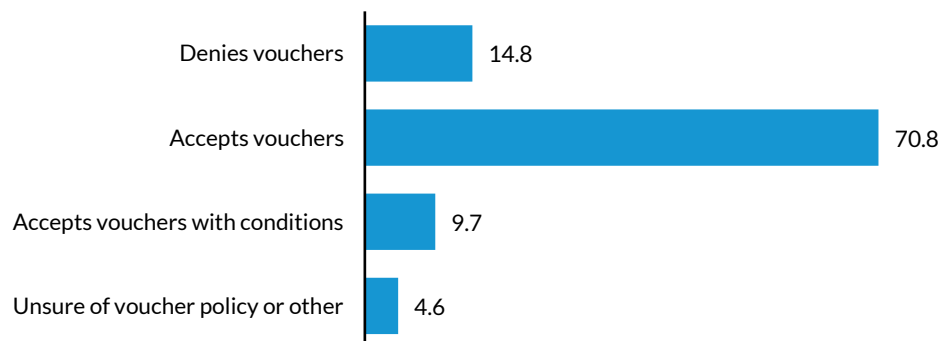
The Housing Choice Voucher program’s main goals are to provide low-income households with stable, affordable housing and to improve access to a wide range of neighborhoods. In theory, voucher holders can move anywhere they can find an affordable home; in practice, their choices also depend on finding landlords who accept vouchers. Our five-city study found that finding voucher-affordable housing and landlords that say yes to a voucher can be extremely challenging.

Voucher-acceptance tests. In Philadelphia and Washington, DC, we first found rental advertisements that met voucher requirements and then asked landlords if they accepted vouchers. In three other cities, we also tracked landlord interactions with matched pairs of testers (one with a voucher, one without) in phone and in-person tests.

Some DC landlords refuse to accept vouchers. About 15 percent of DC landlords refused to accept vouchers. An additional 14 percent placed conditions on voucher use or was unsure of their voucher policy. These landlords may have placed conditions on all apartment seekers or been genuinely unsure of their policy, or they may have been passively denying voucher holders.

Finding rental housing is challenging for voucher holders. Our study shows that finding housing with a voucher is extremely difficult, from identifying an available unit and reaching landlords to finding landlords willing to accept vouchers to meeting with landlords to view available housing. In DC, we screened about 15,000 ads to complete 432 tests or about 35 ads per test.

FIGURE 1
Voucher Denial Rate, Washington, DC



WASHINGTON, DC, TEST SITE

Voucher testing took place in the District of Columbia and Montgomery County, Maryland, which consists of 552 square miles, and houses approximately 1.7 million people. The city of Rockville in Montgomery County was excluded from testing. In 2015, the rental vacancy rate was 5.5 percent for DC and 3.9 percent for Montgomery County. Both DC and Montgomery County have source-of-income protections for voucher holders.

Testers posed as voucher holders from two public housing authorities (PHAs), which were authorized to administer nearly 22,000 vouchers in 2016:

- the District of Columbia Housing Authority (DCHA)
- the Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County (HOCMC)

The DCHA was the only PHA in the study to vary its payment standard by neighborhood location. For example, the payment standard for a unit in the Columbia Heights neighborhood differs from the payment standard for a unit in neighboring Petworth.

STUDY INFORMATION

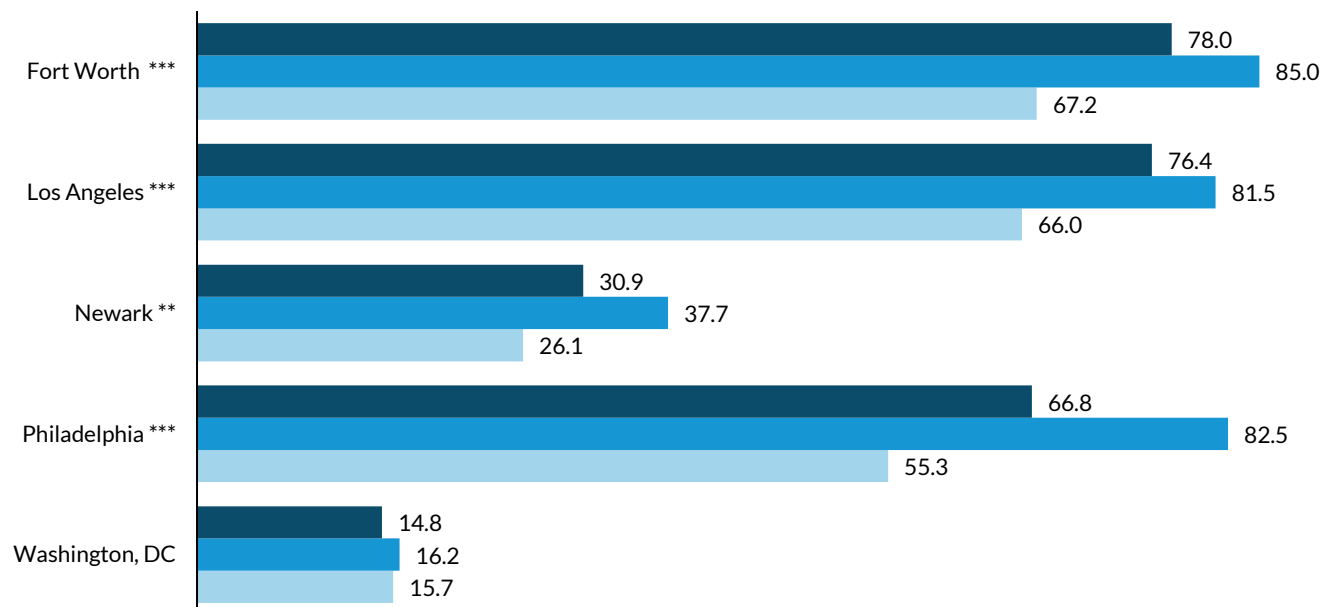
This fact sheet pulls from the Urban Institute's pilot study, *A Pilot Study of Landlord Acceptance of Housing Choice Vouchers*, sponsored by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. This pilot study uses rigorous paired testing methodology to explore landlord treatment of Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) holders during the initial stages of the housing search process. It is the first study to use paired testing methods across multiple sites to examine landlord treatment of HCV holders. Most of the testing occurred in 2016.

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FIGURE 2

Voucher Denial Rates by Site and Low and High Poverty

■ Denial rate overall ■ Denial in low-poverty areas ■ Denial in high-poverty areas



Note: Significance tests measured the difference in denial rates in low-poverty tracts compared with denial rates in high-poverty tracts.

** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.