Do Landlords Accept Housing Choice Vouchers?

Findings from Fort Worth, Texas

Mary Cunningham, Martha Galvez, Claudia L. Aranda, Robert Santos, Doug Wissoker, Alyse D. Oneto, Rob Pitingolo, and James Crawford

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.

Three-stages of testing. In Ft. Worth, Los Angeles, and Newark, we found rental ads that met voucher requirements and used a three-stage testing approach to first ask landlords if they accepted vouchers and then track their interactions with matched pairs of testers (one with a voucher, one without) in phone and in-person interactions. In two other sites, we stopped after the first stage of testing.

Many Ft. Worth landlords refuse to accept vouchers. About 78 percent of Ft. Worth landlords refused to accept vouchers. An additional 10 percent placed conditions on voucher use or was unsure of their voucher policy. Denials were even more common in low-poverty areas (with poverty rates below 10 percent) compared with high-poverty areas (poverty rates above 30 percent): the denial rate was 85 percent in low-poverty areas compared with 67.2 percent in high-poverty areas.

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 Fort Worth, we screened nearly 67,000 ads to complete 1,146 voucher acceptance tests, or about 59 ads per test.

FIGURE 1

Voucher Denial Rate, Fort Worth

- Denies vouchers: 78%
- Accepts vouchers: 11.5%
- Accepts vouchers with conditions: 7.2%
- Unsure of voucher policy or other: 3.3%

We conducted 1,146 voucher acceptance tests in Fort Worth, more than any other site.

High landlord denial rate in Ft Worth, combined with the difficulty of finding eligible housing, made paired testing nearly impossible. Only 73 tests proceeded to in-person paired tests.
FORT WORTH TEST SITE

Voucher testing took place in Tarrant County, which consists of 864 square miles in the cities of Fort Worth and Arlington and houses approximately 1.9 million people. In 2015, the rental vacancy rate for Tarrant County was 9.2 percent. The county does not have source of income protections for voucher holders.

Testers posed as voucher holders from three public housing authorities, which, in 2016, were authorized to administer over 12,000 vouchers:

- Tarrant County Housing Assistance Office
- Fort Worth Housing Solutions
- Arlington Housing Authority

The high landlord denial rate in Fort Worth, combined with the difficulty of finding eligible housing, made paired testing nearly impossible. Only 73 of the 1,146 acceptance tests proceeded to in-person tests. We partnered with the North Texas Fair Housing Center to conduct paired testing.

FIGURE 2

Voucher Denial Rates by Site and Low- and High-Poverty Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denial rate overall</th>
<th>Denial in low-poverty areas</th>
<th>Denial in high-poverty areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forth Worth ***</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>85.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles ***</td>
<td>76.4</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>81.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newark **</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia ***</td>
<td>66.8</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>82.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington, DC</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.