

# BARRIERS TO LANDLORD ENGAGEMENT IN THE HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHER PROGRAM

Evidence from surveys and a field experiment

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In collaboration with the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA), we conducted a pilot study aimed at better understanding the barriers that landlords face to participating in the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program and testing the impact of a light-touch behavioral intervention to encourage participation. Across two surveys and one pilot field experiment, we documented landlords' beliefs and perceptions of the HCV program, and tested different versions of informational mailers aimed at targeting and reducing barriers to participation.

## CONTEXT

The Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program is the largest federal rental assistance program in the United States, serving over two million low-income families each year.<sup>1</sup> The HCV program provides very low-income individuals and households with a voucher – a subsidy – to rent housing in the private market.

While prospective beneficiaries face many barriers to accessing the HCV program, demand for the program far exceeds the supply of vouchers. This results in years-long waitlists for many voucher programs. Once an individual or family receives a voucher, they must then navigate the private housing market in order to find housing. Ultimately, the success of the HCV program hinges on the participation of landlords, which directly determines both the number and the location of available units for voucher recipients. By recent estimates, just two-thirds of voucher recipients are able to find housing using their voucher.<sup>2</sup>

We use the *administrative burden* framework to categorize and study the barriers landlords face to participating in the HCV program.<sup>3</sup> Landlords may lack information about the program or knowledge about how to participate (*learning costs*). The process of participating typically requires landlords to navigate paperwork, contracts, and mandatory inspections (*compliance costs*). And there are pervasive stereotypes about the program and, especially, tenants who use vouchers that may deter landlords from participating (*psychological costs*).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Landlords believe there are large logistical barriers to participation in the Housing Choice Voucher program, but also hold misconceptions about how burdensome the process is.
- 2 There exist pervasive negative stereotypes about tenants who use vouchers, which may deter landlords from participating – even if compliance burdens are reduced.
- 3 Light-touch information interventions aimed at increasing interest in the HCV program yielded null effects in the field, but showed promise in a survey experiment.

## RESEARCH

In 2022, we collaborated with the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority to explore the barriers landlords face to participating in the HCV program. At the time of the study, about 7% of Minneapolis' landlords were participating in the HCV program. This study involved three phases.

### PHASE 1

In March 2022, we co-designed and conducted an online survey that was sent to all active landlords in Minneapolis (N ~ 15,000). The 10-minute survey was sent by the City of Minneapolis and measured respondents' beliefs about the HCV program, views of landlords' role in the community, and perceptions of MPHA.

### PHASE 2

We drew on the results of the survey to co-design and test different outreach messages aimed at increasing engagement in the HCV program among non-participating landlords (N = 13,419). Specifically, we designed messages that targeted landlords' misconceptions about the process of participating in the HCV program and the tenants who use vouchers.

In a randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted in June 2022, all landlords who were not participating in the HCV program at the time of the study were randomly assigned to receive one of three outreach messages. The Status Quo mailer included clear and simple information about the HCV program, adapted from typical outreach language. The Process mailer also provided the same basic information about the HCV program, but included language that aimed to correct misperceptions about the process of participation, including average wait times. The Destigmatizing mailer also provided the same basic information about the HCV program, but included language that aimed to correct misperceptions about tenants who use vouchers.

All mailers included a unique link to an MPHA interest form that landlords could fill out to request more information about the HCV program, let the housing authority know that they had a vacant unit, or sign up to attend a workshop to learn more about the program. The main outcome of interest was submission of the interest form in the four weeks after the mailing date.

### PHASE 3

In September 2022, we conducted a second survey among all active landlords in Minneapolis (N ~15,000). The survey again measured respondents' beliefs about the HCV program, but also included an embedded experiment to extend the findings of the field experiment. Respondents were first asked whether they recalled receiving the outreach mailer.\*

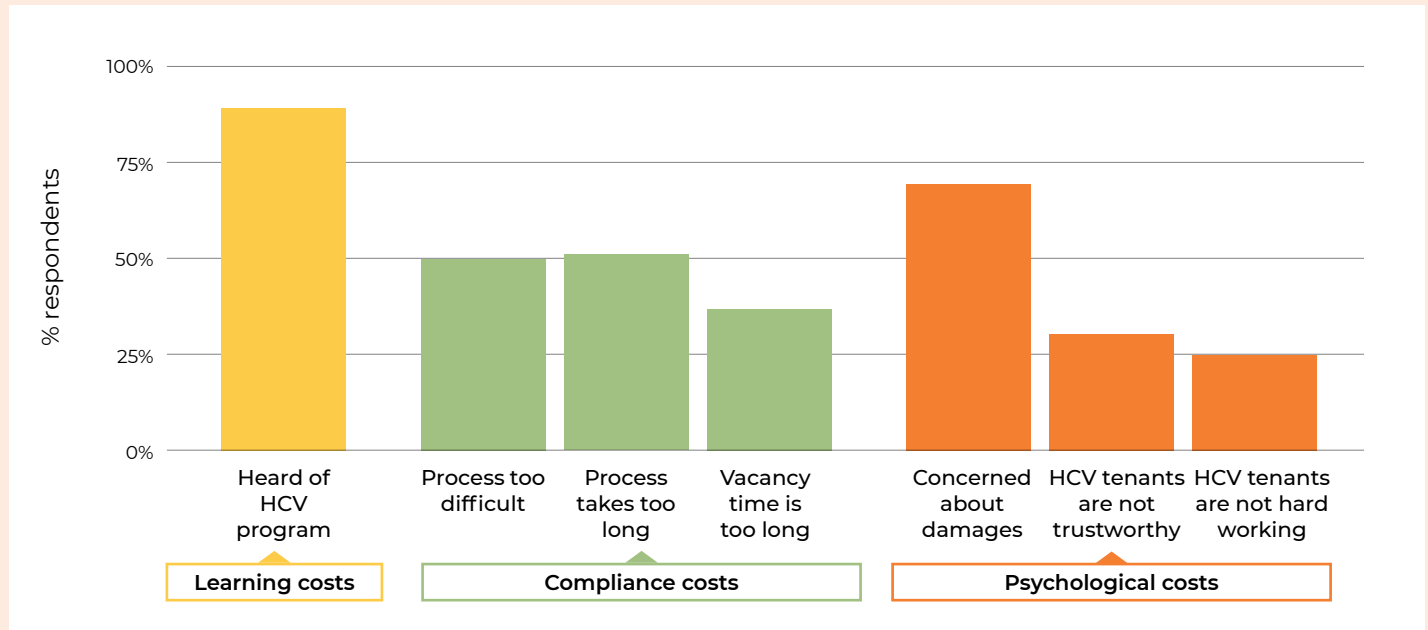
Respondents were then randomly shown one of the three postcards from the field experiment and asked if they would like to complete the same interest form from the field experiment.

\* Of the landlords in the field experiment, 79% had an email address on file, so most of the landlords in our sample should have received both a mailer in Phase 2 and the survey in Phase 3.

## WHAT WE FOUND

In **Phase 1**, of approximately 15,000 landlords who were sent the survey, 1,088 landlords (~7%) started it, and 797 (~5%) submitted it. Over 70% of the respondents were White, and 54% were male. The plurality of the respondents had been a Minneapolis property owner for over a decade, and 62% of respondents own only one or two units. Results from Phase 1 are shown in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1**  
Phase 1 survey results



Note: Bars represent the raw percent of respondents that answered affirmatively to each survey question.

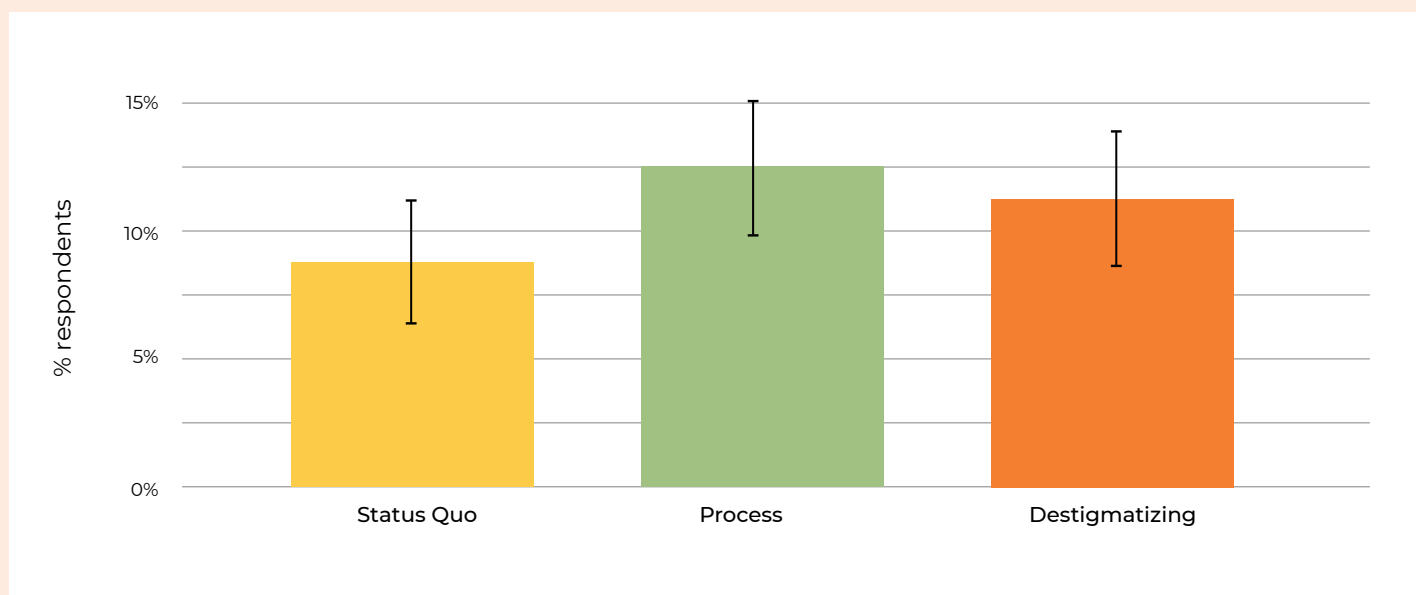
- **Evidence of learning costs:** Overall, 89% of respondents had heard of the HCV program, and 25% were currently renting or had previously rented to a tenant with a voucher. As such, it seems landlords are generally aware that the program exists, although we did not measure other potential information barriers such as knowledge of program eligibility criteria.
- **Evidence of compliance costs:** Fifty percent of respondents believed the process of participation in the HCV program is too difficult and time-consuming to be worthwhile. While respondents' beliefs about the percentage of landlords that fail the inspection on their first attempt were correct on average, we found some evidence of misconceptions about how long the process takes. For instance, 78% of respondents believed the inspection process takes three or more weeks on average, but in reality it typically takes less than two weeks.
- **Evidence of psychological costs:** Overall, 70% of respondents were concerned about property damages caused by tenants with vouchers. In fact, 45% of respondents reported being more concerned about damages incurred by tenants than with the difficulty of the HCV process. Respondents also held other negative stereotypes about tenants with vouchers: 37% of respondents believe tenants are "not responsible," 25% believe tenants are "not hardworking," and 30% believe tenants are "not trustworthy."

Lastly, a series of questions measured respondents' view of landlords' role in the community. While 90% of respondents believed that tenants with vouchers deserve a safe place to live, only 41% believed that more landlords should accept tenants with vouchers, and just 30% believed that they have a personal responsibility to rent to tenants with vouchers. These beliefs also differed by respondents' experience with the HCV program. Respondents with HCV experience were less likely to say that more landlords should accept tenants with vouchers, but more likely to say that they have a personal responsibility to rent to tenants with vouchers compared to landlords with no HCV experience.

In **Phase 2**, less than 1% of landlords who were sent a mailer filled out the interest form, and there was no difference in engagement across the three mailer groups. While light-touch interventions such as this one typically have small effects, the effects found in this study were smaller than anticipated. This could be driven by the fact that the barriers to participation in the HCV program are too high to be moved by a light-touch intervention. It is also possible that the mailers did not reach landlords as intended. We explored this further in Phase 3.

In **Phase 3**, of approximately 15,000 landlords who were sent the survey, 655 landlords (~4%) started it, and 496 (~3%) submitted it. Only 9% of respondents remembered receiving a mailer, suggesting that many landlords may not have received the mailer as intended during the field experiment. In the embedded survey experiment, 8.8% of respondents who were shown the Status Quo mailer completed the interest form, compared to 12.5% of respondents who were shown the Process mailer (see Figure 2). While these differences were not statistically significant, they suggest that baseline interest in the HCV program may be higher than found in the field experiment.

**FIGURE 2**  
Phase 3 survey experiment results



Note: Regression-adjusted proportion of survey respondents who expressed interest in learning more about the HCV program, by experimental condition. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.

## WHAT'S NEXT

Across two large-scale surveys, we found evidence of large compliance and psychological barriers to landlord participation in the Housing Choice Voucher program in Minneapolis. While informational mailers did not significantly increase interest in a pilot field experiment, results from a follow-up survey experiment suggest that additional research may be warranted to further explore the potential impact of such light-touch interventions in this context. In future studies, we will build on these findings to design and test other methods of reducing barriers to landlord participation in voucher programs.

## SOURCES

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2. Gould Ellen, I., O'Regan, K., & Strochak, S. (2021, December). Using HUD administrative data to estimate success rates and search durations for new voucher recipients. [https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/Voucher-Success\\_Rates.pdf](https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/Voucher-Success_Rates.pdf)
3. Herd, P., & Moynihan, D. P. (2019). *Administrative burden: Policymaking by other means*. Russell Sage Foundation.



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The People Lab aims to empower the public sector by producing cutting-edge research on the people of government and the communities they serve. Using evidence from public management and insights from behavioral science, we study, design, and test strategies for solving urgent public sector challenges in three core areas: strengthening the government workforce; improving resident-government interactions; and reimagining the production and use of evidence.



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