

# EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF OUTREACH ON LANDLORD ENGAGEMENT

with Housing Voucher Programs in Massachusetts

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In collaboration with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC), we conducted a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to evaluate the impact of different messaging strategies on landlords' interest in housing voucher programs. In a statewide mail-based outreach campaign, we tested variations in message content (language and length) and mailer modality (letter vs. postcard) on engagement with an informational website about housing voucher programs.

## CONTEXT

Housing voucher programs help tens of thousands of low-income households in Massachusetts afford housing on the private market.\* These programs have been found to reduce homelessness and housing instability, but their success depends on landlords' willingness to participate by accepting tenants with vouchers. Yet most voucher programs have traditionally struggled to attract and retain landlords.

As a result, tenants with vouchers often have trouble finding landlords willing to accept their vouchers.<sup>1</sup> This can limit tenants' housing options and geographic mobility, and even lead to loss of their voucher if they cannot secure a unit within the allotted time. Increasing landlord participation in housing voucher programs is a top priority for policymakers, but there exists little experimental evidence on how to do so effectively.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Landlords who received letters were 82% more likely to engage with the mailer than those who received postcards.
- 2 Mailers that included one motivation (reason) to participate in housing voucher programs generated 24% higher engagement than mailers that included two motivations.
- 3 The most effective message increased engagement by 68% relative to the least effective message, but additional research is needed to understand the impact of different combinations of motivations.

\* In addition to the federal Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, Massachusetts also has the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP)—a state-funded program that is similar to the HCV program.

## RESEARCH

In 2023, EOHLIC and The People Lab co-designed and conducted a statewide mail-based outreach campaign and randomized evaluation to test the impact of different messaging strategies on landlords' engagement with an informational website about housing voucher programs. Prior research suggests that landlords face informational, logistical, and psychological barriers to participation in housing voucher programs.<sup>2,3</sup> We developed four behaviorally-informed messages aimed at reducing these barriers and motivating landlords' interest in the state's housing voucher programs (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1**

Message motivation type and content included on the mailers. Each mailer included either one or two motivations in addition to basic information about the program.

Motivation	Message content
<b>Financial</b> benefits of the program	"By participating, you'll receive guaranteed and timely rental payments, even if your tenant encounters unexpected financial difficulties."
Benefits to the <b>community</b>	"Landlords like you play a critical role in ensuring that everyone in our community has a safe place to live."
Correcting misperceptions about the <b>process</b>	"You make the decisions, just like in the private market. You can use your own screening criteria, establish rents, and use your typical lease."
Potential benefits of leasing to <b>tenants</b> with vouchers	"Tenants with vouchers are typically stable and long-term renters, usually living in a unit for multiple years."

All mailers included basic information describing housing voucher programs, followed by one or two bullet points emphasizing different motivations (i.e., reasons) to participate, as shown in Table 1. In order to test which motivation (or combination of motivations) is most effective, we developed 10 mailer versions that varied along two dimensions: (1) the type of motivation included, and (2) the number of motivations included (one or two). Additionally, we varied mailer modality (postcard or letter).

Every mailer contained the same two calls to action: a unique URL and QR code directing to a state website with information about housing voucher programs, as well as a link to [AffordableHousing.com](https://AffordableHousing.com), a rental listings website geared toward low-income tenants—including those with housing vouchers—where landlords can list available vacancies. The informational website provided a brief overview of Massachusetts' housing voucher programs and included an embedded interest form through which landlords could request more information. Because the URL and QR code were unique per mailer, we were able to track individual-level engagement with the website.

Using a combination of local property records from across the state, supplemented with the City of Boston's rental registry, we identified a sample of 120,554 likely landlords (owning 177,003 total properties) across Massachusetts. Each landlord was randomly assigned to receive one of the 10 mailer versions or no mailer (control group). In total, 110,564 landlords were assigned to receive one of the mailers, while the remaining 9,990 landlords were assigned to the control group. Within each of the 10 mailer versions, landlords were also randomly assigned to receive either a letter or a postcard. All mailers were sent in August 2023, and engagement with the mailer was tracked for the following six weeks.

## WHAT WE FOUND

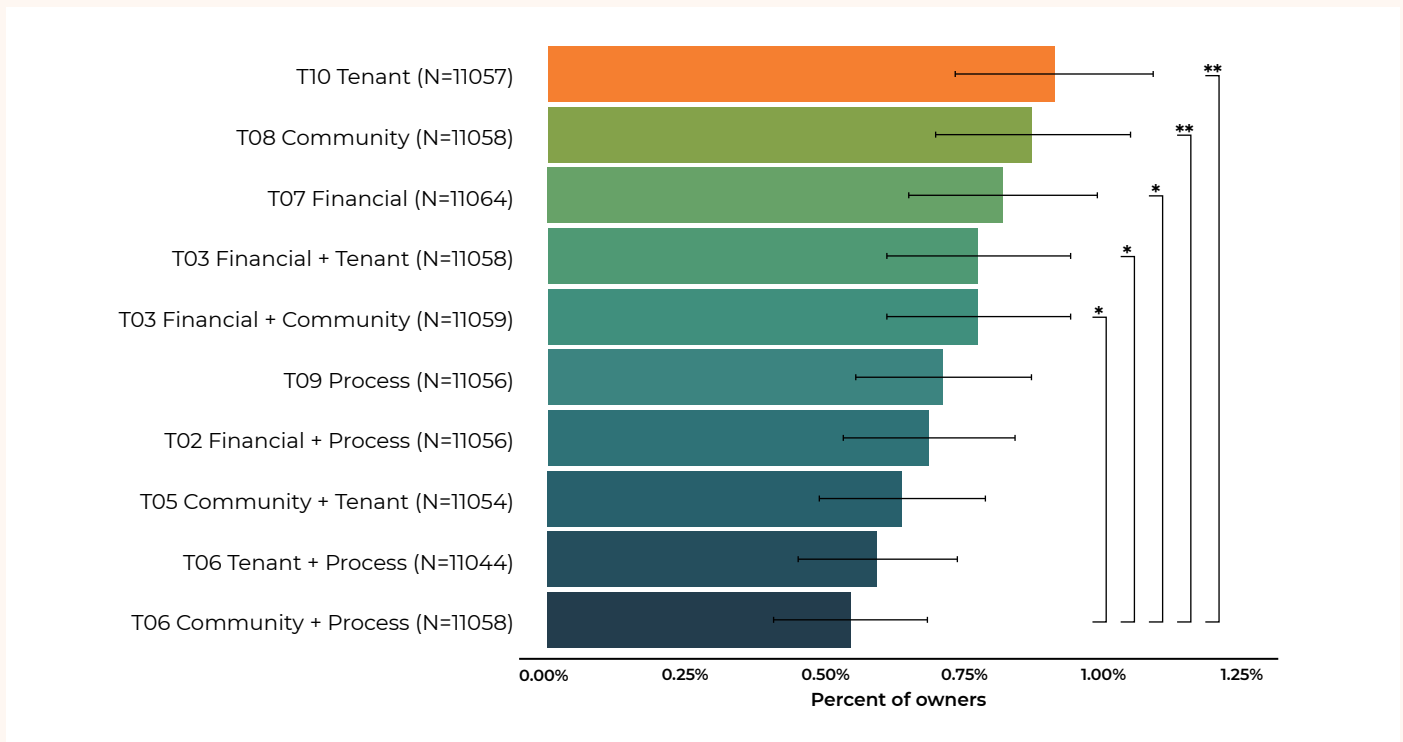
In total, 804 landlords (0.73%) engaged with the mailer, as measured by clicks on the link or QR code provided in the mailer, and 154 landlords (0.14% of the total sample and 19% of those who engaged with the mailer) completed the interest form on the informational website.

**Landlords assigned to receive a mailer with one motivation were significantly more likely to engage with the communication than those assigned to receive a mailer with two motivations.** Of landlords assigned to receive a mailer with one motivation, 0.82% engaged with the link, compared to 0.66% of landlords assigned to receive a mailer with two motivations—a significant 24% increase in engagement.

**Message content (type of motivation) did not have a consistently significant impact on engagement.** We found no significant difference in engagement by message content among the subset of landlords assigned to receive a mailer with one motivation. Among the full sample, we found slightly, but significantly, lower engagement among landlords who were assigned to receive a mailer that contained content aimed at correcting misperceptions about the process. Controlling for the number of motivations included in the mailer, 0.65% of landlords who were assigned to receive a mailer that included the Process motivation engaged with the communication, compared to 0.78% of landlords who were assigned to receive a mailer that did not include the Process motivation.

Examining engagement across each of the 10 mailer groups separately, we found some significant variation, suggesting that the different motivations may interact with each other in ways that affect behavior (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1**  
Owner engagement by treatment condition

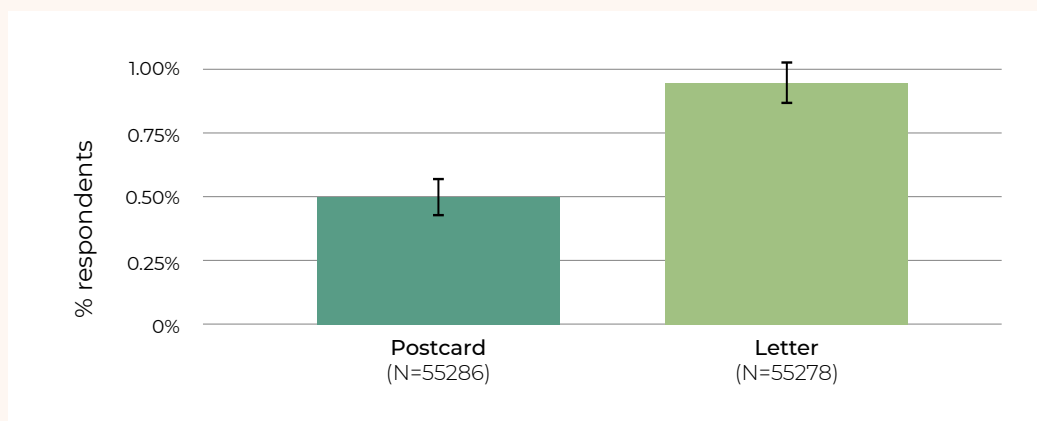


Average engagement rates and 95% confidence intervals for all message conditions, from linear models controlling for mailer modality, county where properties were owned, and number of properties owned. Stars indicate significant differences compared to the least effective message condition (Community + Process). \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

**Letters yielded significantly higher engagement than postcards.** Mailer modality had a strong impact on engagement: 0.94% of landlords assigned to receive a letter engaged with the mailer compared to 0.52% of landlords assigned to receive a postcard (see Figure 2), a significant 82% increase in engagement. This finding holds across all message variations. In other words, regardless of the message content itself, engagement was higher among landlords assigned to receive letters than among those assigned to receive postcards.

This difference in initial engagement translated into a difference in interest form submissions as well. We found that 0.06% of landlords assigned to receive a letter completed the interest form embedded in the state's informational website, compared to 0.04% of those assigned to receive a postcard, a 50% increase.

**FIGURE 2**  
Owner engagement by mailer modality



Average engagement rates and 95% confidence intervals by mailer modality, controlling for message language condition, county where properties were owned, and number of properties owned.

**Engagement differed significantly by several landlord characteristics: number of properties owned, whether the landlord's properties are in an urbanized county, and the landlord's census tract-level median income.** We used data from the 2021 American Community Survey 5-year estimates and urbanization categories defined by the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics to calculate census tract-level and county-level characteristics. This allowed us to explore differences in engagement by landlords' locality and other geographic characteristics, as well as by the geographic characteristics of where their properties are located. We find that:

- ↑ Engagement was significantly higher among landlords with two or more properties (1.23%) than among landlords with one property (0.61%).
- ↑ Engagement was significantly higher among landlords with properties in more urban areas: 0.76% of landlords with properties in large metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) and 0.87% of those in medium-sized MSAs engaged, compared to 0.55% of those in small MSAs/non-metropolitan areas.
- ↑ Engagement was significantly higher among landlords in census tracts with lower median incomes. Those in tracts with median incomes in the lowest quartile (median income = \$12,300–\$82,459) were 35% more likely to engage than landlords in tracts with median incomes in the highest quartile (median income = \$143,066–\$250,001).
- ↑ Engagement rates did not differ meaningfully by landlord census tract-level racial composition or income inequality.

We found no meaningful interaction between census tract-level characteristics and message content, but we caution against drawing definitive conclusions given the overall low engagement rates.

## WHAT'S NEXT

In a large-scale field experiment, we tested the impact of mail-based outreach strategies on landlord engagement with information about housing voucher programs. We found that the modality of communication (letter vs. postcard) and number of motivations (one vs. two) significantly affected engagement, but our findings on the effect of different message content are less conclusive. Additional research is needed to better understand how and why different combinations of message content (i.e., motivations) affect engagement, and to explore which messages are most effective for whom. Future studies should also examine whether increasing engagement and interest in voucher programs affects actual behavior, as measured by lease-ups of tenants with vouchers.

## SOURCES

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### About The People Lab

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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