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LOCATION-EFFICIENT HOUSING FOR LOW INCOME HOUSEHOLDS

Researchers create a toolkit to help low income families in the Portland, Oregon region choose location-efficient housing.

The Issue

Transportation costs are typically a household's second largest expense after housing. For the average household, transportation accounts for about one fifth of household spending. Low-income households are especially burdened by transportation costs, spending up to twice as much of their income on transportation as higher-income households typically spend.

Location-efficiency refers to compact, connected communities—places where there are many destinations and a variety of transportation modes available within a short distance. Those who live in location-efficient areas are likely to spend less on transportation costs than the average household. Location-efficient housing is particularly important for people in the lowest income quintile, who spend nearly 30% of their income on transportation costs.

The Research

Principal Investigator Andrée Tremoulet of Portland State University is primarily a housing researcher, specializing in addressing the challenges of homelessness, affordable housing and community development. Transportation researchers Ryan Dann of Portland State University and Arlie Adkins of the University of Arizona combined their expertise with hers to analyze the transportation-related needs of Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) participants in the Portland, Oregon metropolitan area.

The four housing authorities in the Portland region (Home Forward, Housing Authority of Clackamas County, Housing Authority of Washington County and Vancouver Housing Authority) collaborated to apply for funding from Metro,

THE ISSUE

Households with lower incomes typically spend a higher-than-average percentage of their income on transportation costs.

THE RESEARCH

Researchers conducted focus groups with HCV participants to learn about:

- Their moving experiences;
- What drives their housing location choices;
- What tools could help them obtain location-efficient housing.

IMPLICATIONS

HCV participants searching for housing in tight real estate markets face significant market-related barriers in accessing such housing. These barriers limit their choices about where to live. Assistive tools are most useful when HCV participants actually have location-efficient housing choices.

Photo: Street-level entrance with bicycle in urban core neighborhood

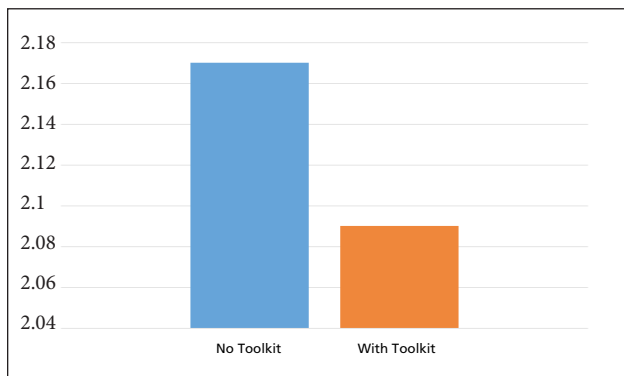
the regional transportation planning agency. Their purpose for initiating this research was to develop a toolkit that their employees could use to assist HCV participants with considering their transportation needs and options.

The first step to creating such a toolkit was learning about the experiences of HCV participants who had recently moved and exploring the main policies, practices and organizational culture surrounding the administration of the HCV program by each of the participating housing authorities. Research methods included interviews with housing authority staff, focus groups with HCV participants and a review of documentary data.

The research team paid particular attention to three concerns: 1) an appreciation of the detailed knowledge that many HCV participants have with transportation options and limitations in their existing neighborhoods; 2) respect for the ability of program participants to make difficult decisions when faced with scarcity; and 3) the need for tools that were simple and easy to use.

Implications

The toolkit created by the researchers includes a pamphlet on including transportation costs when considering housing choices, as well as web addresses for Walk Score Apartment Finder, Padmapper and Google Maps—three search tools which combined help residents identify individualized commute zones and search for housing within them. Also included in the toolkit was a video that demonstrated how to use Walk Score Apartment Finder, a written guide to using Walk Score, and a transportation and housing cost comparison worksheet. Researchers learned during this process that many HCV participants do not contact the housing authority until they already know where they will be moving. Through a technology transfer grant, the researchers were able to get the toolkit into the hands of social service agencies that partner with the



Changes in combined housing and transportation costs

After moving, the toolkit recipients and a control group of recent movers without the toolkit were asked if their combined housing and transportation costs had (1) decreased, (2) stayed the same or (3) increased. This chart shows the averages of each group's answers, indicating a positive correlation between receiving the toolkit and experiencing less of a cost increase.

housing authorities, and are in a position to help movers sooner.

Another key outcome of the research is the dataset that resulted from the 125 individual surveys. Researchers collected plentiful data about housing preferences that can serve as a basis for future studies.

An unexpected outcome of the HCV focus groups was that participants made the group session an opportunity to learn from each other, sharing their strategies for looking for housing and sources of assistance. Because of this, researchers suggest that housing authorities may wish to consider including peer learning opportunities in their orientation sessions.

PROJECT INFORMATION

TITLE: Encouraging Low-Income Households to Make Location-Efficient Housing Choices

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