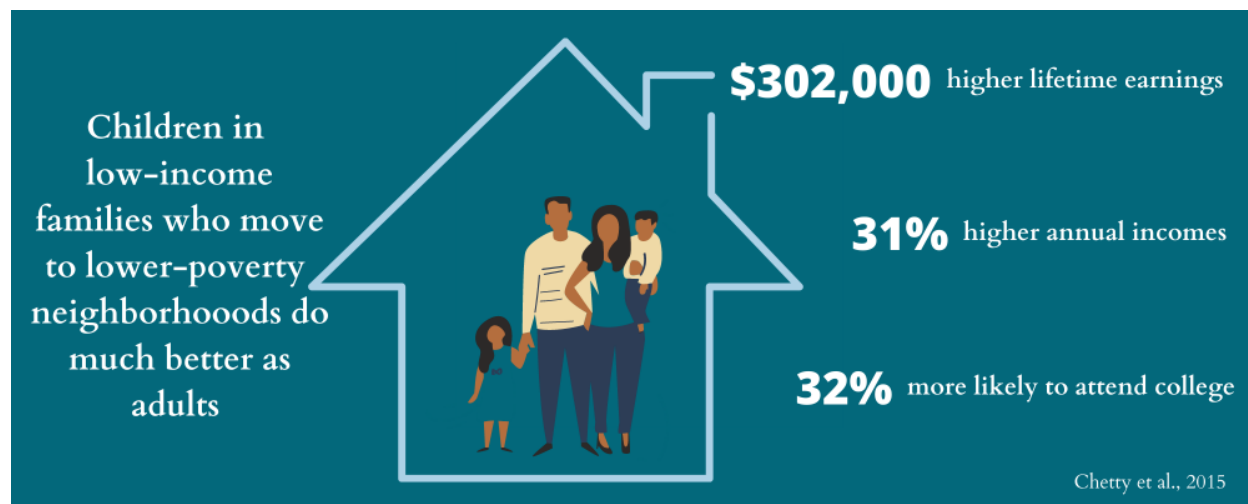


Interview: The Qualitative Research behind Opportunity Vouchers

with Dr. Stefanie DeLuca

The Family Stability and Opportunity Vouchers Act is a bipartisan bill sponsored by Senators Van Hollen (D-MD) and Young (R-IN) that would create new rental vouchers for low-income pregnant people and families with children under age 6 who meet certain criteria (a recent history of homelessness or housing instability, living in an area of concentrated poverty, or being at risk of displacement from an opportunity area). These new vouchers would be coupled with counseling and other individualized services that have a proven track record of helping families move out of neighborhoods of concentrated poverty into low-poverty neighborhoods of their choosing. The half-million new vouchers created through this legislation would be phased in over five years at 100,000 per year.

In our [blog post](#) explaining the merits of the Family Stability and Opportunity Vouchers Act (FSOVA), we emphasized the fact that the programs established by the bill are built around substantial research. Indeed, the bill is backed by rigorous studies that show that opportunity vouchers pay for themselves over time because of the higher earnings of children who have the chance to move to neighborhoods with more resources, less crime, and better schools.



But the FSOVA bill has more than just summary statistics behind it; it is also backed by a decades-long, mixed-methods research literature that identifies the specific mechanisms that make these programs work. One of the primary contributors to this literature is [Stefanie DeLuca](#), the James Coleman Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. [Opportunity Starts at Home](#) sat down with Dr. DeLuca to learn more about her research related to the FSOVA Bill.

OSAH: The Family Stability and Opportunity Vouchers Act incorporates features—such as customized counseling for voucher holders and ongoing landlord engagement—from several successful local voucher programs that prioritize moves to low-poverty, ‘high opportunity’ neighborhoods. These programs include the [Baltimore Housing Mobility Program](#) and the [Creating Moves to Opportunity \(CMTO\) pilot in Seattle](#). You and your field research teams spent a lot of time conducting in-depth interviews with stakeholders in these programs. Can you tell us about what you learned and why these programs work?

Dr. DeLuca: One of the big lessons from our research is that the cultivation of *relationships* with human beings is of paramount importance. This is true across the board. In many cases, participants in these programs are parents who have been through abuse, unstable housing, unstable income, and/or health shocks. When you have a renter like that approaching a prospective landlord, there is a pessimism about whether a landlord is going to ‘take me.’

This ‘human connection’ part is also important for the landlords. That’s one thing I want to highlight here: the importance of communication, having someone to reach out to, somebody who is understanding where you are coming from--whether it’s a small mom-and-pop landlord or a mom or dad of three.

The second lesson is about customizing services and resources to meet a family’s needs. There is customization language in the FSOVA bill which was exciting for us to see because it’s one of the big takeaways from our [research](#). One mom told us, “The program is approaching me where I am, with the situation I’m in.” So, this customization aspect was very exciting because that’s just it: not only may the one-size-fits all approach not work, but also it may not even be the most cost-effective way to do it. You may have a family that just needs a little bit of help with a security deposit, and then there’s a family that needs help with confidence, support, credit repair and conversations with landlords.

The financial flexibility of these programs also provides tenants with a sense of confidence that they will be able to make this move successfully, and the landlords will feel like they won’t lose money on it. This is where it all comes together. The money matters, but if it’s not deployed correctly, it won’t work. And the costs associated can be less expensive than we think.

OSAH: In many ways, these successful programmatic features in Baltimore and Seattle (and written into the FSOVA Bill) that you just mentioned address specific obstacles that traditional voucher holders have faced—obstacles that you have written about in your [previous field work](#). Can you tell us about those barriers and why it is important they are addressed?

Dr. DeLuca: There are a couple of different kinds of barriers. We can break this down into at least three buckets: landlord barriers, family barriers, and institutional barriers both at the housing authority level and within the voucher policy itself.

When thinking about barriers related to landlords, one issue is source-of-income discrimination. Our understanding of this comes from some of the work that the Urban Institute did—Mary Cunningham and her team. They had a [report](#) come out right around the same time our team’s HUD sponsored landlord [report](#) did. We know there is discrimination based on source of income. From the landlord side—we can think of it as the supply side--that is certainly a barrier. It is perfectly legal still in most

cities and states to discriminate against a prospective renter on the basis of income. Alongside discrimination based on income, we also have to recognize credit history as a barrier to renting, which is another way low-income and vulnerable households get rejected as tenants.

Another issue is that the HUD required housing quality standards inspections can be really frustrating for landlords when they don't make sense. We spoke to landlords in Dallas, Cleveland, and Baltimore in some other [work](#) we did that was led more centrally by colleagues of mine: Phil Garboden, Eva Rosen and Meredith Greif. As Meredith has [shown](#), landlords found that the inspections were sometimes capricious, unpredictable, and unfair. There are ways to make that better. The delays, the bureaucratic process of onboarding—whether perceived or real—these are barriers.

Importantly, most of the landlords we spoke with in the HUD funded study had previously participated in the voucher program. This suggests it is not a question of getting people to ever participate but rather how to keep them in the program. The good news from our work in Baltimore and Seattle is that in central Maryland and parts of Seattle--desirable areas with good schools—we have been able to get landlords to open their homes to voucher holders despite ample market-rate demand. So, with this in mind, the landlord outreach aspect of the bill is really important.

In terms of barriers for families, there are conditions of life that make moving stressful. Just getting the voucher is an unpredictable event and then the window of search time is typically about 60 days. One mom in Mobile, Alabama said to me, “The clock starts ticking. And you know in the back of your head, you are going to run down your clock. So when you are calling and no one is calling you back, and you don't have time to visit, and you are working, the clock is running, running, running. You start to think ‘I've got to find housing because if the clock runs out, I am going to lose my voucher—I just waited five years to get it.” So you have this ticking clock, and then you are facing an inhospitable housing market and some families don't realize you can approach a landlord in any market-rate unit with a voucher. That's one of the information gaps that I think is important here. So, families are feeling stressed out about all of these barriers. That's where the counseling that is part of the Baltimore program and CMTO comes in, the staff navigation, the emotional support, the communication that is all so valuable. There is also a kind of a whac-a-mole problem—your childcare is over here, your job is over there, here's where you can find housing—and trying to minimize the time cost. Again, this is where having customized support is key.

On the PHA-facing side—traditionally, housing authorities are evaluated on their performance in the section 8 program through a point system where the incentives are a) to get families housed, b) to keep a wait list, and c) to do third party background and income verification checks. These are often what is rewarded at present rather than incentivizing opportunity moves. We are starting to see movement here—with the [Coons-Kramer bill](#), with the [HUD mobility demonstration](#).

We can make serious headway on removing many of these barriers. The Baltimore program, the CMTO intervention, and in some MTW agencies, people have tweaked a number of these aspects and had success. So, I think unlike some policy areas, we have some good news that is evidence-based.

OSAH: Are there any caveats when it comes to translating the lessons from your research into programmatic features? Anything practitioners should be wary of?

Dr. DeLuca: I do think that it is easy to say, “We can just have some information packets” or “Why don’t we just do a \$500 cash incentive for families?” These lighter touch resources might work for some families, but from what I’ve seen, by and large it just misses the point; it’s not so much that families don’t know where the opportunity neighborhoods are—they do. To give them a pamphlet that shows them where they are—that doesn’t solve the problem. A cash incentive for \$500? Maybe—but some of these deeper aspects—especially this brokering and negotiation with landlords—are important because these big barriers like credit and potential discrimination on the basis of income, that’s not something that a pamphlet or \$500 solves. So, the customized services are important. If you are going to spend some money on voucher programs and it doesn’t have the desired outcome, why not do it right instead? We know we can do it right and we know it matters. We know enough about the significance of neighborhood context and policies to improve it to act.

OSAH: In addition to your work documenting the experiences of stakeholders prior to and during these moves, you have also done field work with families after they have made these moves. Can you tell me about their experiences—both positive and negative—and how programmatic features of the bill might respond to promote the positive and limit the negative?

Dr. DeLuca: In Baltimore, both with the original MTO work and the Baltimore Housing Mobility Program work, it is hard to overstate the importance of living somewhere safe. So that’s one dimension of these post-move experiences--safety is vitally important.

What gets lost in a lot of this are the benefits for parents. A lot of what we focus on with opportunity vouchers--and this is partly why they have been successful in a bipartisan way--is because the benefits for kids are a real selling point and they absolutely should be. But for kids to do well, parents need to feel good and we often miss that. I want to emphasize the importance of these moves for moms’ mental health - this mental health aspect of parenting is really important, and it relates to kids’ improved performance in the long run.

The value of being able to raise your children in a diverse neighborhood has also come up quite a bit. I think the value of diversity is something that everybody recognizes and is very attractive—of raising children where they are going to get a sense for what the world is really like.

I think we know—this came through with the [Chetty, Hendren and Katz work](#)—there is an important age where students benefit more from moving before that age. While these age effects might show up because they reflect the benefit of having longer periods of time to grow up somewhere safe, somewhere diverse, somewhere with better schools, there is likely more to it. My former student Anna Rhodes did some further [analysis](#) based on our Baltimore work. She has found that it may also be the case that younger children make friends more easily because they are less picky about what makes for a ‘good friend’ at younger ages. And it may be that adolescents could benefit from ‘opportunity moves’ too, but that it’s important to recognize that social ties, belonging, friendship, and connections are vital to young people. It’s one thing to just move to a new neighborhood because it seems beneficial and it’s another to lose friendships and have to make them again, at a developmentally sensitive period of life where identity exploration is central. This is one space that is key to pay attention to moving forward. Some of the parents in Seattle tried to involve their older children in thinking through their moves and I

think we could learn how to support parents better in these situations on a programmatic level. Again, this is where customized support can play a big role.

OSAH: Is there anything else that you have learned from your research on these programs that you think it's important for policymakers and practitioners to know?

Dr. DeLuca: Two of the most important lessons we've already touched on—the importance of relationships and the importance of customized support. The last lesson I want to emphasize has to do with landlords. My observation is that during the pandemic, a lot of the conversation around the eviction moratoria was focused on making sure evictions didn't happen to families. It wasn't until much later that there was any conversation about what it means for landlords.

The landlord piece is key here. More of the rent relief programs are starting to think about this, but how to do it right is less clear. It's vital to figure out how to bridge resources to landlords during this time, while they are housing families. I think about landlords as brokers of housing opportunity, brokers of geographic opportunity. Without the supply side, none of these programs happen. If we have a blind eye to the housing providers, we are going to have trouble succeeding on any of these important programs. That's why the landlord liaison piece in the bill is really important.