IDENTIFYING HIGH-OPPORTUNITY NEIGHBORHOODS IN THE GREATER BOSTON AREA FOR SECTION 8 VOUCHER HOLDERS

INTRODUCTION

HUD’s Section 8 (Housing Choice Voucher) Program is the nation’s single largest federal housing program. Created in 1974, one of its goals was to give low-income renters greater choice in where they live and thereby facilitate the deconcentration of poverty. However, despite the program’s emphasis on housing choice and mobility, a significant percentage of Section 8 voucher holders continue to live in high-poverty neighborhoods. This has prompted policymakers and scholars to look for ways to help Section 8 voucher holders move out of high-poverty neighborhoods and into what have been called “high-opportunity” neighborhoods. Although there is no consensus on what exactly characterizes a high-opportunity area, researchers often identify these neighborhoods as those with low poverty rates, low crime rates, and high-performing schools.

For this research project, I was interested in identifying high-opportunity towns in the greater Boston area that might be particularly advantageous areas for low-income families. I then wanted to assess how realistic it would be for Section 8 voucher holders to move to these high-opportunity towns, based on the number of Section 8 voucher holders already living in each town and the median rent for each town.

METHODS

In order to assess each town’s level of opportunity, I created five indices:
1. Poverty index (based on poverty rate)
2. Crime index (based on violent crime rate)
3. Education index (based on school ranking)
4. Employment index (based on unemployment rate)
5. Transportation index (based on distance from closest MBTA station)

For each index, I classified towns into five classes and then labeled each class as very low, low, medium, high, or very high. Next I added up all the scores for each town to create a composite “opportunity score.” Then I classified the opportunity scores into five classes to create the “opportunity index.” The last step involved putting the opportunity index in context by mapping the number of Section 8 voucher holders in each town and the median rent for each town.

RESULTS

Based on this set of criteria, the four towns that had a “very high” opportunity index were Belmont, Lexington, Newton, and Brookline. There were also nine towns with a “high” opportunity index: Braintree, Melrose, Milton, Arlington, Reading, Wilmington, Winchester, Bedford, and North Reading.

Not surprisingly, the towns with the highest opportunity indices tended to have higher median rents and fewer Section 8 voucher holders compared with lower opportunity areas. This suggests that these areas are too expensive and/or not particularly desirable to voucher holders. However, using the maps and the chart, we can identify towns like Braintree and Arlington that have a high opportunity index, are relatively affordable, and already have a relatively high number of Section 8 voucher holders. Areas like these might be the most promising for voucher holders.

CONCLUSION

It is important to point out one major limitation of this project. The data from the American Community Survey has a high margin of error, so some of this data might not be accurate. (For example, the poverty rate for Revere was listed as 4.6%, but other sources cite Revere’s poverty rate as much higher.)

Despite its limitations, this project presents a potential framework for Section 8 voucher holders, housing agency staff, and policymakers alike to better understand the geography of opportunity in the greater Boston area. It also demonstrates the need for higher Section 8 rent guidelines in high-opportunity areas so that Section 8 voucher holders can afford to live in these towns.