



For Minorities, Major Housing Hurdles

by NPR Staff

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New research says blacks and Latinos are more likely to live among themselves in poorer areas than with whites in nicer areas. Some have used Section 8 housing vouchers to get around those barriers and move to suburbs, only to find city officials and neighbors who've allegedly harassed them. To learn more, guest host Tony Cox speaks with an attorney for Neighborhood Legal Services for Los Angeles County, and an NPR National Correspondent.

TONY COX, host: This is TELL ME MORE, from NPR News. I'm Tony Cox. Michele Martin is away. Coming up: Remember the saying that there's always work at the Post Office? With talks of cutting some 120,000 jobs from the U.S. Postal Service, some are wondering whether that's still true. We'll talk about it in just a few minutes.

But first, we want to talk about housing choices. For many people, more money means a chance to move into a larger house in a nicer neighborhood. But for blacks and Latinos across all income levels, this isn't necessarily the case.

A recent study by Brown University found an existing neighborhood gap where blacks and Latinos are more likely to live among themselves than with whites.

Earlier, we spoke with the study's author, John Logan, a researcher at Brown University.

JOHN LOGAN: We've looked at data from 2005 to 2009, American Community Survey at the census tract level, so we know what kind of neighborhoods people live in. And what we found is that African-Americans and Latinos live in very different kinds of neighborhoods than whites or Asians with comparable incomes.

And, in fact, as one example, affluent African-Americans who earn over \$75,000 a year actually live in poorer neighborhoods than whites who are earning less than \$40,000. So this is a surprising finding.

COX: Now, he goes on to explain why this happens.

LOGAN: There are two reasons for the differences in the kinds of neighborhoods that different groups live in. One of them has to do with people's preferences and choices, and that's an important part of the situation.

However, what we find from all other research is that there are also some barriers to entry to white neighborhoods experienced by African-Americans and Latinos. There continues to be discrimination in the housing market, despite the fact that we outlawed it 30 or 40 years ago.

COX: Section 8 housing vouchers have helped some blacks and Latinos get around those barriers, but once they move away from their familiar communities and into communities in the suburbs, they tend to encounter resistance from neighbors and local officials.

These risks have led to a lawsuit in Lancaster and Palmdale, California, both suburbs of Los Angeles, where voucher recipients complain of harassment by city officials.

Here to tell us more about this, Maria Palomares, attorney for Neighborhood Legal Services for Los Angeles County, representing the plaintiffs. She joins us from Hollywood.

Also with us here in studio, Alex Kellogg, national correspondent for NPR.

Welcome to both of you.

ALEX KELLOGG: Thank you very much.

MARIA PALOMARES: Thank you for having us.

COX: Alex, tell us first what Section 8 housing is and how it works.

KELLOGG: Section 8 housing is, basically, government-subsidized housing. There are more than three million families that benefit from it each year, and there are two types of it. There's housing choice vouchers and project-based Section 8.

Now, most people are familiar with vouchers because those are the largest federally funded rental assistance program in the nation, and vouchers basically were designed to disperse poverty out of concentrated urban areas where there was a lot of poverty and crime.

COX: So who are the people, then, that get these vouchers?

KELLOGG: The people that get the vouchers are the poor. They tend to take those vouchers and move wherever they want. It's a market-driven process. People are chosen based on what their income is and what the median income is in their particular area. There's a certain number that are set aside for the disabled and for homeless veterans, but basically, it's the poor.

COX: So now, Maria Palomares, this has been a big problem in the suburb of Los Angeles, Lancaster and Palmdale. Your organization, along with the NAACP and the Community Action League, are suing both those cities on behalf of the Section 8 voucher recipients. What's the problem?

PALOMARES: Well, the problem is, as Mr. Kellogg was saying, is that the Federal Housing Choice Voucher Program was created to allow the historic victims of discrimination to move into communities of their own choosing and to encourage racial integration.

And for a period, this was happening in the cities of Lancaster and Palmdale. Black and Latino Section 8 voucher holders were moving into the cities of Lancaster and Palmdale.

However, recently, the city officials have started implementing policies and practices that target Section 8 households aimed at reducing and eliminating the number of black and Latino families that are coming into these cities. So they are acting against the very purpose of the program, which was to integrate cities that were traditionally white. An example of this is Lancaster and Palmdale.

COX: If you're just joining us, this is TELL ME MORE, from NPR News. I'm Tony Cox.

We are talking about the changing face of neighborhoods and how some residents are reacting to that change. We're speaking with NPR National Correspondent Alex Kellogg here in studio, and attorney Maria Palomares joining us from Los Angeles.

Two questions for you, Alex. Number one: Are there laws protecting housing discrimination by race? I'm assuming that there would be.

And number two: Is this, what we're describing, in terms of Lancaster and Palmdale, is this a national problem?

KELLOGG: Well, there's a growing perception that people are moving into areas that they weren't previously, particularly suburbs all over the country, exurbs like Lancaster and Palmdale, which are removed slightly from Los Angeles.

There are no laws, generally speaking, that protect people from discrimination based on the fact that they live in Section 8 housing, but, of course, there are laws that protect people from being discriminated against on the basis of race.

So in this particular instance, and there are other instances across the country, the argument is that Section 8 is actually a proxy for race.

COX: Interesting. Maria, let me ask you. I understand that the lawsuit is not claiming that the investigations run by these various cities - Palmdale and Lancaster in this case - they're not claiming that they are illegal. So what do the plaintiffs want? What is the goal of the lawsuit?

PALOMARES: The goal of the lawsuit is to have the cities stop their policies and practices which discriminate against black and Latino families and that target them and harass them.

For example, the cities of Lancaster and Palmdale have inserted themselves in policing black and Latino Section 8 households by paying for additional Housing Authority investigators. In part,

they've paid for a total of three additional investigators that monitor and harass black and Latino families dedicated solely to these two cities.

By comparison, the Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles - which monitors and oversees the Section 8 Voucher Program in the county - has a total of three investigators.

And these investigators have been used by the cities to perform overly aggressive compliance checks on black and Latino households. And, as a result, 70 percent of the overall investigations that occur in Lancaster and Palmdale are conducted with armed sheriffs. And by comparison with the rest of the county, only eight percent occur with armed sheriffs.

COX: What is the explanation that the cities of Palmdale and Lancaster are giving for taking these actions against Section 8 voucher holders?

PALOMARES: Well, the cities see it as their duty to come in and oversee this program, but it's not. This is a federal program that is administered by the county, and it is the county's role to oversee this program.

And, in fact, the recipients of this program wait almost 10 years, if not more, to get onto the Section 8 Voucher Program and go through rigorous background checks to make sure that they qualify income-wise. They report all their criminal history, and they do a revised version every year.

COX: Alex, stories like what we are hearing from California suggest that the number of Section 8 voucher residents moving into the suburbs has increased, perhaps dramatically. Is there any evidence of that?

KELLOGG: Actually, experts don't think so. The fact of the matter is there's a set number of people who are in government-subsidized housing. It's slightly under five million. Slightly more than two million of those have vouchers. Now, that has grown ever-so-gradually over time, so it's not like there are more and more people receiving vouchers.

As she pointed out, vouchers take a long time to get. You are often on a waiting list for years. And, as a matter of fact, even if you would be eligible, you won't necessarily get one.

So the question is: Are people moving in ways that they weren't before? It's very hard to prove that that's actually taking place.

COX: That's my final question for you, Maria Palomares. There are people with vouchers moving, I presume, into a lot of different neighborhoods. The lawsuit comes from just two cities north of Los Angeles, Lancaster and Palmdale.

But are there problems bubbling elsewhere with regard to Section 8 that haven't reached the level that they have in the lawsuit?

PALOMARES: We have heard of other cities enacting similar policies and practices. In California, there's a city in Antioch. I'm not entirely familiar with all the specifics, but when we've spoken to other attorneys in cities that are encountering similar practices, they have mentioned that the actions taking place in the cities of Lancaster and Palmdale are far worse.

They are creating a sense of terror in the community and there's a lot of harassment to get black and Latino families out of the community. They're essentially using a program that was intended to encourage desegregation and using it as a tool by which to further segregate.

COX: Maria Palomares is an attorney for Neighborhood Legal Services in Los Angeles, California. She joined us from Hollywood.

Alex Kellogg is a national correspondent for NPR. He joined us here in our Washington, DC studio.

Thank you both.

KELLOGG: Thank you.

PALOMARES: Thank you.

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