

Report: People On Housing Assistance Are Moving To The Suburbs

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Low-income people who receive federal housing vouchers are moving to the suburbs — a 42 percent increase in metro Hartford between 2000 and 2008, according to a new report.

The Brookings Institution, a Washington, D.C. think tank, said changes in federal policy during the 1990s gave people who receive housing vouchers more living options.

"Jobs moved to the suburbs, and people followed," said Michael Stoll, a senior fellow at Brookings and chair of UCLA's Department of Public Policy who co-authored the report. "We found that, while vouchers are giving people the chance to move where the opportunities are, voucher recipients are not moving into high-opportunity neighborhoods as often as they might."

The federal housing voucher program is available to assist low-income families, the elderly and disabled to get housing in the private market — as opposed to living in government-owned housing. In general, housing vouchers are available to families whose income does not exceed half of the median income for the county or metropolitan area where the family lives. The median household in Connecticut was \$66,187 last year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

In Metro Hartford, the total number of vouchers increased by 42 percent from 22,793 to 32,462 between 2000 and 2008. The percent of vouchers in the suburbs increased from 46.6 percent to 51.2 percent. That's an actual increase of 5,999 households on housing vouchers in Hartford suburbs three years ago that weren't there in 2000. More recent figures were not immediately available Thursday.

Nationally, 49.4 percent of voucher recipients lived in the suburbs in 2008, an increase of 2.1 percent since 2000. Some cities experienced a 10 percent increase or more in the suburbanization of people on housing vouchers, such as Phoenix, Ariz., Boise, Idaho and Stockton, Calif.

Voucher recipients moving to the suburbs didn't drive rapid growth of suburban poverty, but they were a factor in that trend, according to the Brookings report.

"While HUD has made the voucher program more flexible, there is more to do," Stoll said. "The idea was to help get people out of urban poverty pockets, but we don't want to simply plunk them down into new poverty pockets in the suburbs."

Authors of the report say it raises questions about where to go from here.

"Just as federal officials need to fine-tune the voucher program, local leaders need to understand how this trend is playing out in their regions, so they can make better land-use and economic planning decisions," said Lance Freeman, assistant professor of urban planning at Columbia University, and a co-author of the report. "Where are people going to live? Where are the jobs going to grow? How do we connect the two? Those are fundamental issues to community viability."