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Hierarchies in the Decentralized Welfare State: Prioritization in the Housing Choice Voucher Program

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Abstract

Social provision in the United States is highly decentralized. Significant federal and state funding flows to local organizational actors, who are granted discretion over how to allocate resources to people in need. In welfare states where many programs are underfunded and decoupled from local need, how does decentralization shape who gets what? This article identifies forces that shape how local actors classify help-seekers when they ration scarce resources, focusing on the case of prioritization in the Housing Choice Voucher Program. We use network methods to represent and analyze 1,398 local prioritization policies. Our results reveal two patterns that challenge expectations from past literature. First, we observe classificatory restraint, or many organizations choosing not to draw fine distinctions between applicants to prioritize. Second, when organizations do institute priority categories, policies often advantage applicants who are formally institutionally connected to the local community. Interviews with officials, in turn, reveal how prioritization schemes reflect housing agencies' position within a matrix of intra-organizational, inter-organizational, and vertical forces that structure the meaning and cost of classifying help-seekers. These findings illustrate how local organizations' use of classification to solve on-the-ground organizational problems and manage scarce resources can generate additional forms of exclusion.

Keywords

welfare state, public policy, categories, networks, housing

People in need in the United States face a fragmented, decentralized social safety net that substantially differs according to where they live (Allard 2009; Bruch, Meyers, and Gornick 2018; Michener 2018; Peck 2001). Notably, people in different locales can encounter different available supports, intake procedures, and program conditions. Contributing to this unequal landscape is a vast system of federal and state government transfers to county and local entities responsible for providing services and distributing resources to final recipients (Dilger and Cecire 2019; Marwell 2004; Smith and Lipsky 1993). In accordance with the U.S. emphasis on local control, or the idea that localities should control who receives help (Lieberman 1995),

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these transfers often take the form of blocks of resources that organizations must divide up.

How does decentralization shape people's access to state resources? This question has grown more pressing as social provision across many advanced capitalist democracies has become increasingly decentralized in recent decades (Gilbert 2002). In the United States, reforms beginning in the 1980s expanded the powers of local and county organizations to decide how resources are distributed in their communities, prompting sociologists to call for more scholarship on the policies and actions of these organizations (Allard 2009; Marwell and Morrissey 2020; Smith and Lipsky 1993). Such organizations make choices in a challenging landscape. Even as they gained powers, financial support for many social programs stagnated, declined, or became increasingly decoupled from local needs (de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad 2013; Hall 2010; Reich et al. 2017; Skinner and Rosenstiel 2017).

In this article, we examine how organizations solve an important class of resulting dilemmas: how to distribute social goods when need exceeds supply. Welfare state decentralization and retrenchment produce these dilemmas in many countries (Gilbert 2002), but they are particularly acute in liberal welfare regimes like the United States, where social provision is modest and targeted (Esping-Andersen 1990). From home energy assistance to childcare subsidies to housing vouchers (the focus of this article), organizations in the United States ration many resources according to locally-devised policies that classify and sort help-seekers. Whether by selective outreach, waitlist controls, or selection procedures, these policies stratify access to state resources. Some strategies explicitly attach tangible resources to being on a particular side of a social or administrative boundary, such as policies that offer earlier access to public benefits to those past a certain age or those with a documented health condition. Other strategies can produce inequalities in more indirect ways, such as when seemingly neutral defaults like selection by lottery or first-come first-served waitlists implicitly disadvantage marginalized populations (Office of Evaluation Sciences 2021; Persad, Wertheimer, and Emanuel 2009; Reese et al. 2021).

Yet these local meso-level policies have largely escaped direct sociological scrutiny. They represent a missing middle in scholarly inquiries on the effects of decentralized social provision, with existing research primarily focused on high-level rules or outcomes at the state level (Brown and Best 2017; Bruch et al. 2018; Moller 2002; Reese 2005) or on-the-ground front-line implementation (Haney 2010; Seim 2017; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Watkins-Hayes 2009). Typically better shielded from the glare of public scrutiny and political contention than high-level legislative choices (Hacker 2004), meso-level policies fill in the gaps and vagaries of broad policy dictates and present immediate structures that guide and constrain work on the front lines.

We use the case of prioritization policies in the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program, the most significant rental assistance program in the United States, to illustrate hidden ways classification stratifies access to scarce state resources, and we elucidate the distinctive forces that shape policy choices entrusted to local organizations. We first conduct a descriptive analysis of 1,398 local policies that govern which categories of voucher applicants advance to the top of waiting lists for assistance. Using network methods to represent the relationships among categories that prioritization policies encode reveals two key findings. First, whereas literature on the pervasiveness of concerns about deservingness in U.S. welfare state design might lead us to expect that local agencies draw extensive, fine-grained distinctions between help-seekers, we find that a large proportion of local agencies exercise *classificatory restraint*, meaning they draw few or no categorical distinctions between those eligible for help. Instead, many default to lotteries or first-come first-served systems, especially agencies with smaller programs

in rural, conservative areas. Second, among agencies that do classify and rank applicants by priority, policies often advantage people already institutionally embedded in the local community: people who already live and work in the jurisdiction, have ties to the local housing agency, or are connected to other local community organizations and institutions.

To understand the factors underlying these choices, we interviewed officials charged with designing policies across diverse locales. Our 23 interviews reveal how a matrix of intra-organizational, inter-organizational, and vertical forces contribute to these patterns. In particular, interviews highlight how decentralization to the local level (1) puts policymaking powers in the hands of agencies with widely varying administrative capacities, (2) strengthens feedback loops between policymakers and front-line workers who experience the costs and ambiguities of classifying people in need, (3) enmeshes choices within lateral relationships with other local organizations that together try to make sense of their communities, and (4) exposes local agencies to performance evaluation systems from above that encourage prioritizing applicants believed to be safer bets for success. These mechanisms illustrate how local policy choices do not straightforwardly mirror local attitudes, demographic pressures, and economic conditions. Instead, local policy choices reflect the distinct pressures and constraints that local organizations face.

This article contributes to sociological understanding of how decentralization within social programs can produce inequalities in access. First, we specify organizational processes that shape which local prioritization choices are understood as practically and morally viable. In so doing, we amend existing accounts of decentralized policies, which have tended to view local policy choices as reflections of community conditions or macro-level demands, abstracted away from the organizational contexts in which they are made (Haney 2010). Second, this study expands our understanding of the role of classification in how states distribute resources. By highlighting how the work and uncertainties entailed in classifying people shape local approaches, we depart from sociological accounts of the U.S. welfare state that focus on why state entities classify help-seekers as they do. Instead, we unpack why state agents might choose *not* to classify. Our results further reveal that as organizations wrestle with the challenges of classification, local policies tend to entrench an axis of difference between people who are and are not already connected and legible to local institutions. These policies cannot fully be explained by theories that conceive of welfare policy choices as motivated by interests in enforcing symbolic boundaries of deservingness. Rather, this study demonstrates how local entities' efforts to solve on-the-ground organizational problems can lead to policy choices that produce particular forms of inclusion and exclusion.

Methodologically, this article models how researchers can use network methods to analyze similar types of prioritization policies in other domains. Substantively, it expands our knowledge of the HCV Program. With rental assistance in the United States only sufficiently funded to support one in four eligible households (Schwartz 2014), this article sheds light on an important form of rationing that shapes who ultimately accesses this valuable benefit (Moore 2016).

WHO GETS WHAT IN DECENTRALIZED STATES

When localities are pressed to ration scarce social support resources, who will policies advantage? This question is especially salient in the U.S context. As cross-national research highlights, the U.S. welfare state is one of the most extreme examples of what Esping-Andersen (1990) calls a liberal welfare state. These welfare states tend to provide minimal assistance, target help to specific subgroups rather than offer universal entitlements, and rely on market-based solutions. Comparative studies of welfare states' formal policies

(Scruggs 2008) and the scope of their transfers (Brady and Bostic 2015; Korpi and Palme 1998) emphasize how the U.S. welfare state produces higher rates of poverty and unmet need than do other advanced industrialized democracies.

Most scholarship argues that the U.S. welfare state organizes its scarce supports around preserving boundaries between those constructed as deserving and undeserving of help (Katz 2013; Schneider and Ingram 1993; Steensland 2006; Watkins-Hayes and Kovalsky 2017), driven by deep-seated concerns that unscrupulously providing aid can create perverse incentives that perpetuate poverty (Somers and Block 2005). Analyses of social provision as components of broader disciplinary systems further emphasize that state resources tend to be allocated to enforce workforce participation and adherence to dominant behavioral norms (McCabe 2023; Piven and Cloward 1993; Soss et al. 2011; Wacquant 2009). These streams of research suggest that localities are likely to prioritize certain groups that are popularly valorized as deserving recipients of aid: the working poor, those who cannot work through no fault of their own (e.g., elderly people and people with disabilities), veterans, dual- rather than single-headed households, and people with no history of receiving assistance (Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986; Iceland 2013; Katz 2013; Schneider and Ingram 1993; Van Oorschot 2006). Past research further predicts that local organizations will create elaborate prioritization policies that stratify access according to fine-grained hierarchies of moral worth.

Scholarship on the social construction of deservingness reveals how national and state-level discourses shape overarching patterns in high-level policy decisions, yet broadly shared moral constructs are less well-situated to explain variation within locally administered programs. Such an approach also tends to presuppose that moral anxieties are the primary drivers of policy choices about who gets what. Researchers commonly use deservingness as an analytic frame to interpret debates and policies, even though the construct is not the lens through which policymakers understand their choices (Guetzkow 2010). Portraits of modern poverty governance similarly capture broad trends in aid provision, illuminating interconnections between state institutions, but they tend to focus less on subnational variation. Recent empirical and theoretical work is often grounded in studies of large metropolitan areas (e.g., Gong 2019; Herring 2019; Stuart 2016) with institutional arrangements that may not generalize to smaller cities, suburban areas, and rural areas.

Another stream of research examines which community factors predict geographic variation in policy designs and outcomes within decentralized social programs. Although research in this area has not directly sought to explain prioritization policies, studies of other outcomes, such as the generosity, inclusiveness, or punitiveness of decentralized policies, identify a few key factors that tend to structure local policy choices: local racial composition, political ideology and partisanship, the policies of neighboring jurisdictions, and the extent of demand for assistance (Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Fording, Soss, and Schram 2007, 2011; Kelly and Lobao 2021; Reese 2005; Soss et al. 2001). This work predicts that poorer, conservative jurisdictions with large populations of Black residents will have more complex prioritization policies.

This literature often implicitly treats decentralization to the state, county, and local levels as engendering similar processes, albeit at different scales. While some scholars have observed that decentralization to lower levels of geography may lead to stringent policies because localities fear attracting poorer residents (Kim and Fording 2010; Peterson and Rom 1990), this literature primarily analyzes decentralization to the local and county levels as arrangements that afford greater opportunities to more precisely express geographically patterned political attitudes, economic conditions, and demographic anxieties.

By contrast, we contend that transferring power over policy details from federal- and state-level legislatures and regulatory bodies

to local entities activates specific organization-level processes that influence the policy choices made. As we discuss in the next section, situating decision-making power within local entities exposes policy decisions to the particular pressures that organizations at this level confront, and influences which triage strategies agencies regard as practically and morally viable.

STATE CLASSIFICATION AND PRIORITIZATION

Two Dimensions of Classification Schemes: Substance and Elaboration

Before discussing the forces that shape local prioritization policies, we distinguish between two dimensions of prioritization policies: their substance and elaboration. To date, most research on classification in social policy has focused on the *substance* of categorical distinctions made: the axes of social difference that policies mobilize to control access to resources. For example, do policies distinguish between those working and those not, those with children and those without? Analyzing which categorical distinctions policies invoke can reveal whether policies reinforce salient social divisions and further institutionalize existing forms of categorical inequality (Tilly 1999).

A second dimension has received less attention, what we refer to as a prioritization policy's *elaboration*. This encompasses the number of categorical distinctions policies draw, as well as the degree to which policies arrange categories into a hierarchy. How many distinct kinds of people do policies recognize? And to what extent do those judgments of kind become judgments of relative worth (Fourcade 2016)? Elaborate policies affirm stratified obligations to distinct groups. They may also affect access to help, as complex policies can burden help-seekers trying to prove category membership and disproportionately deter marginalized applicants (Herd and Moynihan 2019; Keene et al. 2021; McCabe 2023).

Studies of classification in U.S. social policy often obscure elaboration. For instance, research on deservingness discourses commonly starts from the premise that policies will draw fine-grained moral distinctions and stratify access to help in elaborate ways. Seminal works, such as Mohr (1994) and Mohr and Duquenne (1997), take as given that a community's patterns of social provision reflect a single elaborate moral order; the challenge is to uncover that order's structure and meaning. However, social provision need not always be coupled with elaborate classification systems. Allocating scarce resources according to category memberships can also provoke opposition. When classification stands in tension with tenets of liberal democracy that suggest the state should treat people as individuals rather than members of a class (Starr 1992), countervailing ideological winds can undercut the legitimacy of using elaborate classification schemes to ration resources. Triage based on category memberships could engender resentment for making literal the deep story, popular within the modern American conservative movement, that the government unfairly allows favored groups to cut ahead in line (Hochschild 2016). As a practical matter, elaborate classification schemes also require work that not all bureaucracies are equipped to carry out. In the following sections, we outline three sets of forces that shape the substance and elaboration of local organizations' prioritization policies.

Intra-organizational Forces

Administrative capacity. More so than legislatures crafting high-level policies, local organizations make policy choices under conditions of limited administrative capacity (Lipsky 1980). Much scholarship examining social provision as a site of moral regulation and social control suggests that prioritization policies will be elaborate, not taking into account how limits of administrative capacity constrain what is feasible. In the housing voucher case we examine, the local agencies

that administer the program—housing authorities—can have as few as one or two full-time employees who are tasked with wide-ranging, complex administrative responsibilities (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2015). Categorical prioritization can add more work for already burdened workers. It requires up-front investments of organizational resources to determine how to define and rank categories, as well as ongoing effort to verify and track who qualifies for priority. This can be uncertain and labor-intensive work (Headworth 2021; McCabe 2023). Real lives tend not to fit neatly into bureaucratic boxes, a difficulty compounded in programs serving marginalized populations (Comfort et al. 2015; Lara-Millán 2017; Prottas 1979).

We contend that the labor required to classify applicants will result in less elaborate prioritization policies, especially in smaller organizations that experience these constraints most acutely. When organizations do set category-based priorities, we expect they will favor categories that entail less work to implement internally. These might include categories that are highly institutionalized in the United States, with standardized definitions backed by extensive record-keeping infrastructure (e.g., elderly), or categories with fuzzy or contested boundaries, for which definitions and verification work can be outsourced to local external specialists (e.g., shelters for assessing homelessness or domestic violence victimization).

Reduced social distance. Decentralization to the local level reduces the social distance between people seeking help, front-line workers who implement policies, and administrators who design policies. We contend that this dynamic influences prioritization choices in a two-stage process. First, because help-seekers and front-line workers are more likely to share communal and personal ties, especially in smaller communities, front-line workers more readily recognize clashes between their personal understandings of help-seekers and the coarse ways bureaucratic categories simplify individual lives (Prottas 1979). Consequently, front-line bureaucrats may be skeptical of classification systems as a legitimate basis for stratifying access to resources. Second, these front-line perspectives are more likely to inform policy choices in local bureaucracies because the staff who develop policies and the staff who implement them are separated by fewer layers of organizational hierarchy; indeed, they may be the same people. Whereas past scholarship emphasizes distinctions between managers and front-line workers (Seim 2017), the collapsed structure of local organizations can allow front-line knowledge of the uncertainties, moral ambiguities, and discretion that go into classifying people to more readily inform policy designs (Lara-Millán 2017).

We contend that this front-line feedback will tend to produce *classificatory restraint*, whereby organizations favor less elaborate policies or refrain from categorical prioritization altogether. Smaller organizations may especially often default to impersonal approaches like lotteries and first-come-first-served to avoid explicitly judging who is most worthy of assistance. To the extent that organizations persist in categorizing, we might expect them to enforce distinctions between community insiders and outsiders. In the HCV Program, where housing authorities serve bounded geographic areas, this might translate to prioritizing current local residents or people with existing ties to the local housing authority.

Inter-organizational Horizontal Forces

Local entities that administer resources are situated within broader ecosystems of community-based organizations, public bureaucracies, and private organizations (Bouek 2018; Marwell and Morrissey 2020). These organizational peers can offer external expertise, such as in how to classify help-seekers or support people facing complex challenges, which agencies can leverage to reduce the costs of implementing priorities for particular categories. They can also serve as sources of community knowledge to inform agencies' understandings of pressing local needs.

Community-based organizations, in particular, often represent themselves as legitimate conduits of community perspectives (Levine 2016). How those organizations define their populations of focus (Okamoto and Gast 2013), in turn, shapes which groups of residents have a formalized civic presence and surface as legitimate targets of priority on the radars of local policymakers (de Graauw et al. 2013; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008).

We expect prioritization policies will be more elaborate in localities with more extensive organizational infrastructure, as peer organizations petition for their own target populations to be prioritized and offset the burdens of prioritizing those groups. We further expect that policies will favor applicants connected to or served by organizational peers, as well as groups that are the targets of inter-organizational collaborations. In the case of housing authorities, formal collaborations often develop around funding streams to coordinate social supports for high-need subgroups or to help families achieve "self-sufficiency." Most notable among these are Continuums of Care (CoCs), which serve people experiencing homelessness, and grants to support partnerships with child welfare agencies, Department of Veterans Affairs offices, organizations serving persons living with HIV/AIDS, and job-training providers. Such collaborations may promote policies that prioritize the targeted groups.

Institutional Vertical Forces

Local entities receiving funding from higher levels of government are commonly subject to two sets of pressures from above. The first includes broad anti-discrimination provisions specifying protected characteristics that may not be a basis for providing or denying resources. The HCV Program, for example, is subject to the Fair Housing Act (FHA), which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, and familial status.[1] Scholars have argued that such provisions are ambiguous and produce uncertainties about what counts as compliance (Edelman 1992). This legal environment may discourage elaborate policies, especially at smaller organizations with fewer internal resources to evaluate whether a policy violates anti-discrimination statutes (Congressional Research Service 2012). It may also spur local organizations to adopt common strategies to navigate uncertainties, such as copying peers and taking cues from funders, regulators, and external consultants (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) who might prevet certain choices. For housing authorities, this could mean prioritizing categories listed as examples in the Code of Federal Regulations, which codifies the rules governing the HCV Program.

Another set of pressures comes from funding agencies' performance metrics, which can affect an organization's chances of future funding or lead to extra monitoring and scrutiny. These metrics build in implicit incentives and sanctions for different actions (Lipsky 1980), leading organizations to adapt their behavior to align with what performance evaluation systems value (Espeland and Sauder 2007). In an early illustration of this dynamic, Blau (1963) showed how an employment agency evaluated on job placement rates focused on clients deemed easier to place.

Prioritization policies, we expect, will similarly reflect performance measures, with organizations more likely to prioritize applicants they believe will help them achieve better scores. In the case of the HCV Program, the Section Eight Management Assessment Program notably rewards "proper selection of applicants," which evaluates whether housing authorities have written waitlist policies and follow them. It also encourages housing authorities to increase their lease-up rates, that is, the percentage of their voucher allocation actively used to lease units. The former criterion may encourage less elaborate, easier-to-implement prioritization policies. The latter may incentivize housing authorities to favor applicants who they believe are better positioned to succeed in the private rental market (McCabe 2023).

PRIORITIZATION IN THE HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHER PROGRAM

Waitlist prioritization policies that shape entry into the Housing Choice Voucher Program offer a compelling case to examine how decentralization to the local level shapes inequalities in social provision. With sufficient funding to support only a small share of eligible households (Moore 2016), the program reflects broader trends in the social safety net that create difficult choices about whom to help (McCabe 2023; Rosen 2020), including stagnant or declining funding for non-entitlement programs and mismatches between the amount of funds available and the degree of local need. Waitlist prioritization policies are representative of the types of policy levers given to local entities under waves of decentralization that have pressured local organizations to meet multiple competing mandates at once. They must manage resource shortages while maximizing efficiency, promoting the "self-sufficiency" of those receiving help, and crafting policies responsive to local needs and preferences (Congressional Research Service 2012; Kleit and Page 2008).

The HCV Program is the largest federal rental housing assistance program in the United States. It offers families making less than half their area's median income a subsidy to rent in the private market. Exemplifying the U.S. welfare state's reliance on market-based strategies, the program places the onus on voucher-holders to find housing, an often-difficult task, as some landlords refuse to accept subsidized tenants or screen tenants in discriminatory ways (Garboden et al. 2018; Rosen, Garboden, and Cossyleon 2021). Voucher-holders contribute 30 percent of their household income toward rent, and the voucher covers the rest of the cost.[2] In fiscal year 2018, the program served over 2 million families and cost over $22 billion (McCarty, Perl, and Jones 2019).

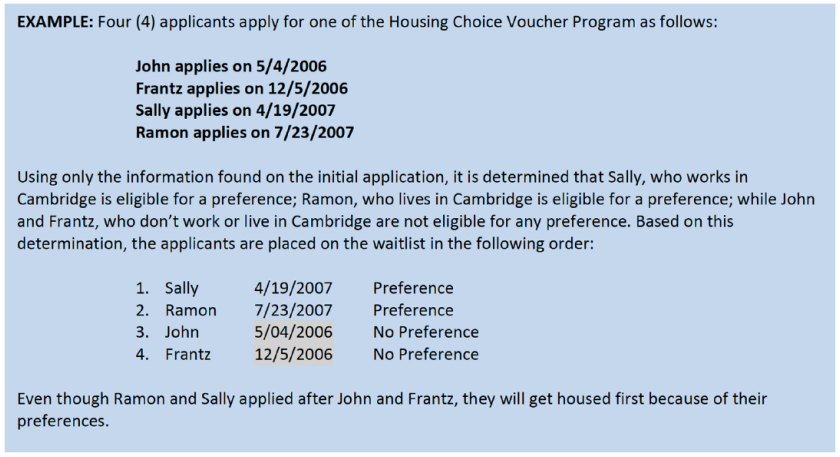
The program's waiting lists reflect excess demand for assistance. In 2012, more than 2.8 million families were on voucher waiting lists (Public and Affordable Housing Research Corporation 2016). This figure understates the scale of need; when waiting lists get too long, housing authorities often close them to new applicants. Indeed, analysts estimate that 9.8 million families would be on waiting lists if they were not capped (McClure 2017).

The over 2,000 public housing agencies (PHAs) that implement the program are independent public corporations, departments within city or county government, or regional and state agencies that sign contracts with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to administer a set number of vouchers. Commonly referred to as housing authorities, these organizations are governed by boards of commissioners and led by executive directors. Typically, commissioners are residents, community leaders, or elected officials appointed by mayors, county councils, or governors depending on a housing authority's geographic scope. Commissioners are responsible for setting the overall direction of local programs and approving policies, but our interviews indicate that executive directors and other housing authority staff usually develop policy details like waitlist policies.

Local Preferences

In this article, we examine local preferences, which are policies that allow housing authorities to set the order in which different categories of applicants are selected from waiting lists. Applicants who do not qualify for any preference are placed at the end of the line and typically processed by application or lottery order, as illustrated in Cambridge Housing Authority's policy presented in Figure 1.[3]

Beyond their value as a theoretical case, local preferences are consequential because they stratify access to housing assistance. As key elements of the selection pipeline that shapes entry into the HCV Program (McCabe 2023; Moore 2016), preferences structure how long applicants must wait for a voucher and, in high-demand areas with years-long waits, who has a realistic shot at ever receiving a voucher (Public and Affordable Housing


EXAMPLE: Four (4) applicants apply for one of the Housing Choice Voucher Program as follows:

John applies on 5/4/2006
Frantz applies on 12/5/2006
Sally applies on 4/19/2007
Ramon applies on 7/23/2007

Using only the information found on the initial application, it is determined that Sally, who works in Cambridge is eligible for a preference; Ramon, who lives in Cambridge is eligible for a preference; while John and Frantz, who don't work or live in Cambridge are not eligible for any preference. Based on this determination, the applicants are placed on the waitlist in the following order:

1.	Sally	4/19/2007	Preference
2.	Ramon	7/23/2007	Preference
3.	John	5/04/2006	No Preference
4.	Frantz	12/5/2006	No Preference

Even though Ramon and Sally applied after John and Frantz, they will get housed first because of their preferences.

Figure 1. Example of How Preferences Create Distinct Tiers of Priority
Source: Cambridge Housing Authority Housing Choice Voucher Administrative Plan.

Research Corporation 2016). Extended waits compound hardship and increase applicants' exposure to substandard housing, high rent burden, and homelessness (Acosta and Guerrero 2021; Rita, Garboden, and Darrah-Okike 2022; Rosen 2020). Elaborate preference policies can generate stress, uncertainty, and distrust among applicants (Keene et al. 2021; Rita et al. 2022; Rosen 2020), reinforce power relations (Schwartz 1974), and transmit implicit messages to applicants about what they should expect from the state and whom social programs are meant to help (Auyero 2012; Schneider and Ingram 1993). Like selection procedures in the private rental market, preferences can create "winners and losers within already disadvantaged groups" (Rosen et al. 2021:817). Table 1 summarizes the framework we outlined in the previous section, applies it to the housing voucher case, and presents examples of specific categories likely to be prioritized given the factors highlighted.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA

Our analysis proceeds in three parts. Part I summarizes overall patterns in the categories that housing authorities tend to prioritize. Pooling across local policies, we investigate what categorical distinctions are especially salient bases of prioritization. Part II explores variation in local prioritization policies (see Figure 2). We use clustering to group together prioritization policies that are similar in elaboration and the categories they prioritize. We then summarize the characteristics of the housing authorities in each cluster to describe how housing authorities' choices are geographically patterned. In Part III, we draw on interviews with housing authority officials and consultants to interpret key findings from Parts I and II, understand the meanings and motivations behind policies, and further unpack how pushing policy decision-making to local organizations shapes choices.

Data on Local Preferences

Our primary source of preference policy information is Housing Choice Voucher administrative plans, which all housing authorities are required to develop to describe local policies. We collected plans between 2016 and 2020. We first collected plans posted on housing authority web sites. We then emailed all remaining housing authorities that administer the HCV Program to request a copy of their plan, using the full set of PHA email

Table 1. Overview of Three Forces and Their Expected Influence on the Elaboration and Substance of Preference Policies

	Context under Decentralization	Elaboration Response	Substantive Response	Housing Choice Voucher (HCV)-Specific Factor	Example Categories in HCV Context
Intra-organizational	Administrative capacity constraints	Reduce elaboration	Prioritize using highly institutionalized categories		elderly; disability
			Prioritize where work to evaluate category membership can be outsourced		homelessness with referrals; domestic violence with referrals
	Reduced social distance	Reduce elaboration	Draw insider-outsider distinctions	Housing authorities serve defined geographic areas	resident; current/past tenants in housing authority programs
Inter-organizational	Situated in ecosystems of local community organizations	Increase elaboration	Prioritize those connected to peer organizations and categories that are targets of inter-organizational collaborations/petitions	Common collaborations serve high-need populations via supportive services, improve "self-sufficiency"	people with referrals or receiving services from other local organizations, homelessness, child welfare, veterans, people living with HIV/AIDS, job training
Vertical	Need to manage ambiguities of complying with anti-discrimination law	Reduce elaboration	Use formally pre-vetted categories and copy ones many others use	Code of Federal regulations	resident; working; disability; domestic violence; displacement; homelessness; single-headed household; violent crime victimization among families in public housing
	Subject to performance management systems	Depends on metrics	Prioritize populations thought to improve performance metrics	Performance metrics reward high lease-up, which incentivizes selecting "easier-to-serve" populations	people with referrals or receiving services from other local organizations, working

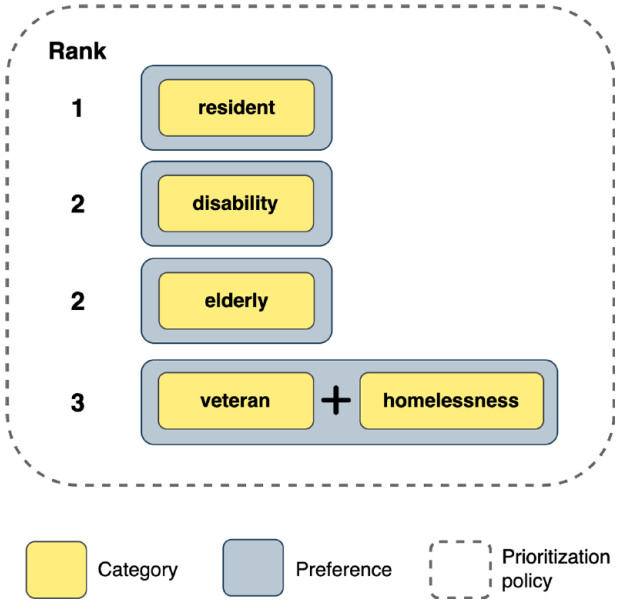


Figure 2. Relationship between Categories, Preferences, and Prioritization Policies

addresses contained in publicly available HUD program records. Finally, we conducted an additional round of email and telephone outreach to select housing authorities, targeting those that were underrepresented in our sample with respect to program size, state and region, and local demographics. When we were unable to access administrative plans, we collected information from application forms, websites, and correspondence with housing authority officials. We supplement this information with data on housing authorities without preferences from a 2012 survey of housing authorities by Abt Associates (Dunton et al. 2014).[4]

Our sample includes preference information for 1,398 housing authorities: 54 percent are from administrative plans, 32 percent from the Abt Associates survey, and 14 percent from voucher application forms, website text, and direct correspondence. Table 2 compares our sample of preference policies with the universe of housing authorities that administer Housing Choice Vouchers.[5] Our sample covers 67 percent of HCV-administering housing authorities and around 87 percent of all active vouchers. Despite efforts to increase the representativeness of our sample, it has lower coverage of housing authorities with smaller programs. Although our sample is not representative of all housing authorities, those we have preference data for serve areas that resemble the universe along many observable characteristics. Our sample also represents the most complete information on preferences available to date. Together with a team of research assistants, we hand-coded preferences following a coding guide with 59 preference categories. Details about our coding process are in the online supplement.

Data on Housing Authority Characteristics

To study how preferences vary by housing authority characteristics, we gathered data on the size of housing authority programs and the geographic areas they serve. Using data from HUD's Voucher Management System, we measured an HCV Program's size based on the median number of vouchers administered monthly between April 2016 and March 2018. We supplement this with data on the total number of housing units a housing authority served.

Prior research suggests that conditions in a housing authority's service area may correlate

Table 2. Characteristics of Housing Authorities in Sample versus All Voucher-Administering Housing Authorities by Quartile

	Housing Authorities in Sample			All Housing Authorities		
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q1	Q2	Q3
Housing Authority Size						
Vouchers administered	146	401	1,107	115	288	806
Total units served	271	624	1,573	217	503	1,193
Service Area: Demographics						
% White alone	55	75	88	57	75	89
% Black alone	2	5	14	1	4	14
% Asian alone	1	1	4	1	1	3
% Hispanic	3	7	17	3	6	15
% Veteran	7	9	10	7	9	10
% Below poverty	11	15	19	11	15	19
% Unemployed	6	7	9	6	7	9
% Receiving SSI/TANF/SNAP	21	29	35	21	28	36
Median household income	$44,158	$51,551	$62,708	$43,530	$51,055	$62,392
Service Area: Housing Market						
Median rent burden %	28	30	32	28	30	32
% Units renter-occupied	26	32	39	26	32	38
% Units vacant	8	12	17	8	12	17
% Census tracts in metropolitan area	20	94	100	17	93	100
# Affordable per 100, without assistance	12	21	37	12	21	38
# Affordable per 100, with assistance	38	51	65	39	51	65
Service Area: Organizations						
# Community nonprofits per 1,000	.62	1.01	1.58	.60	1.02	1.60
# Human services organizations per 1,000	2.51	4.05	6.64	2.45	4.17	6.84
% with local-level Continuum of Care		61			59	
Service Area: Politics						
% Republican vote, 2016	38	51	65	41	53	65
Region						
% Midwest		26			27	
% Northeast		22			25	
% South		37			36	
% West		15			12	
Observations		1,398			2,099	

with local policy choices (Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Fording et al. 2007, 2011; Kelly and Lobao 2021; Soss et al. 2001). Building on this, we assembled data on five sets of local characteristics. First, we use tract-level American Community Survey (ACS) 2012 to 2016 five-year estimates to capture *demographic and economic characteristics* of housing authority service areas, including ethnoracial composition, poverty level, unemployment, receipt of other welfare transfers, household income, and the presence of veterans.

Second, we assembled data on the *housing market.* We gathered tract-level ACS data on

median rent burden (percent of household income spent on rent), percent of units that were renter-occupied, and percent of units that were vacant. To capture need for housing assistance, we use data on the number of affordable housing units available for every 100 households with incomes at or below 30 percent of the area median income. We report figures with and without accounting for available housing assistance (Getsinger et al. 2017), with the latter offering a proxy for excess unmet need.

Third, we look at the local *organizational ecosystem.* We use the National Center for Charitable Statistics Core Data Files (Urban Institute and NCCS 2015) to measure the number of community nonprofits (Sharkey, Torrats-Espinosa, and Takyar 2017) and human service organizations per 1,000 people below the poverty line. As a proxy for the strength of local inter-organizational networks, we evaluate whether a housing authority is located in a geographic area with a local or regional Continuum of Care (CoC) for coordinating homelessness resources. Because creating a CoC requires formal partnership structures and joint planning processes, we see the creation of a local or regional CoC as indicative of stronger local inter-organizational ties.

Fourth, we look at local *politics* via the county-level Republican vote share in the 2016 presidential election (MIT Election Data and Science Lab 2018). And fifth, we examine patterns by Census *region*.

We gathered data based on housing authority office locations and HUD estimates of housing authority service areas. To aggregate tract-level data to the service-area level, we identified tracts that intersect with each service area and took the mean across those tracts for each measure. Additional details on data sources and how we aggregated data is available in the online supplement.

Interviews with Housing Authority Officials and Consultants

We conducted 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews with housing authority officials, including executive directors, housing program directors, and managers. We sampled for range (Small 2009), seeking diversity in geographic service areas and preference policies to better understand how local contexts shape choices.[6] Several interviewees had experiences working in multiple housing authorities. Collectively, interviewees discussed their experiences with 36 housing authorities. We also conducted a group interview with four consultants who have advised many housing authorities on their local policies.

Interviews were completed in 2020 and averaged 42 minutes. We asked about each housing authority's local challenges and opportunities, how and why the housing authority arrived at its preferences, what the preferences meant to officials, and how different stakeholders influence preferences. In our interview with consultants, we asked about their observations across the housing authorities they advise.

We analyzed transcripts through an iterative coding process. We created data matrices (Lareau 2021), where each row contained quotes and interpretive notes for a different housing authority and each column covered a specific topic or idea, such as perceptions of the voucher shortage or practical challenges with implementing preferences. We read down columns to analyze commonalities, contrasts, and silences among housing authorities and across rows to situate each housing authority's quotes within the context of the broader interview. As we did so, we lumped and split columns to have the appropriate resolution to surface themes. We also drafted analytic memos on emergent themes that further drew connections between our interview data and quantitative results.

PART I: CATEGORY CENTRALITY ACROSS HOUSING AUTHORITIES

In this analysis, we summarize overall patterns in the axes of difference that housing authorities' prioritization policies make most salient. To capture the complex ways that prioritization

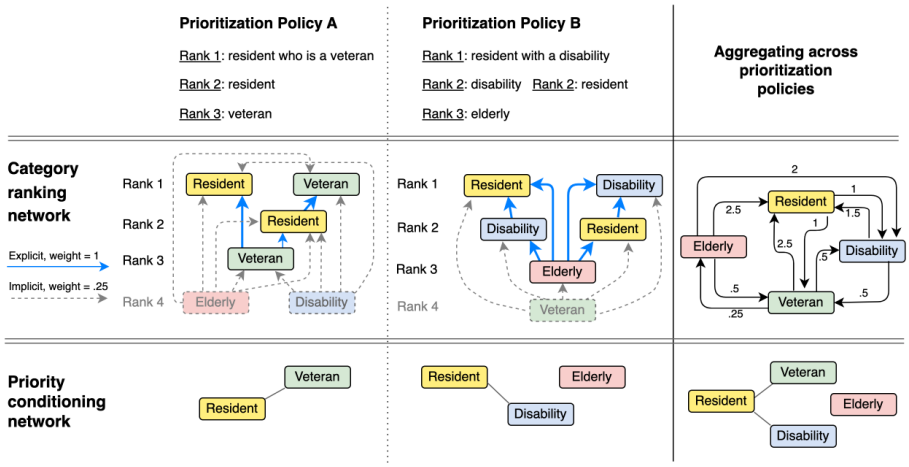


Figure 3. Overview of Approach
Note: This figure illustrates our approach using a simplified example with two prioritization policies and four categories. It shows how we draw edges to capture how categories rank and condition eligibility for greater priority, as well as how we aggregate across policies in Part I.

policies make some social categories more valuable than others, we represent the relationships between categories that policies establish as network structures. Figure 3 provides an overview of our approach. Network representations allow us to analyze how classification produces multidimensional social orders (Fourcade 2016; Mohr and Duquenne 1997) and enable us to use existing network measures to assess the centrality of different categories in these structures. In particular, we examine the centrality of categories within prioritization policies from two complementary vantage points: (1) which categories tend to be ranked highest, and (2) which categories most frequently condition eligibility for priority when housing authorities require applicants to fit multiple categories simultaneously. Each offers a window into a category's importance based on its structural relationships to other categories, subtleties that simpler descriptive measures, like how often individual categories are prioritized, would miss.

Which Categories Tend to Rank Highest?

To evaluate which categories housing authorities tend to rank highest, we transform our coded preference policies into a directed network. Our setup draws inspiration from approaches to inferring status based on asymmetric relations between nodes in settings like friendship networks (e.g., Ball and Newman 2013), where lower-status actors are expected to nominate higher-status actors, but higher-status actors are not expected to return the favor (Gould 2002).

In our network, the nodes are the 59 categories we coded. Each time a prioritization policy ranks one category above another, we draw a directed edge that originates from the lower-ranked category and points to the higher-ranked category. We consider category A to be higher ranked than category B within a policy if the policy (1) explicitly assigns A higher priority than B or (2) implicitly ranks category A above B by not prioritizing B at all.[7]

We pool the edges contributed by all the local policies and characterize the hierarchy among categories by calculating each node's PageRank, a variant of Bonacich and eigenvector centrality (Bonacich 1972, 1987) that applies to directed networks. Developed initially to rank web pages in search engine results (Brin and Page 1998), PageRank encapsulates the intuition that a node is more prestigious the more it is connected to nodes

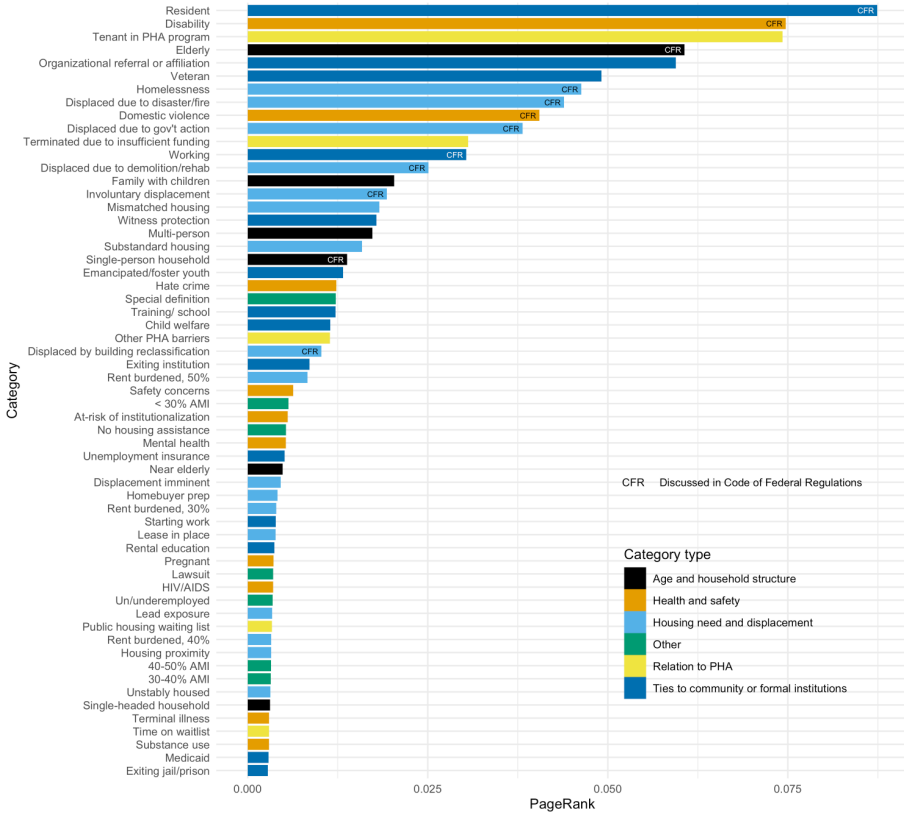


Figure 4. Category Ranking by PageRank Score
Note: "CFR" indicates the category is discussed in the Code of Federal Regulations as an example of a preference that housing authorities can adopt.

that are themselves prestigious. In our context, this means a category is ranked higher the more it receives incoming edges from other high-ranked categories. The PageRank of node i is given as follows:

$$\text{PageRank}_i = \frac{1-d}{n} + d\sum_{j=1}^{n}\frac{L_{ij}}{m_j}\text{PageRank}_j$$

where n is the total number of nodes; $L_{ij} = 1$ if there is a directed edge from node j to node i and $L_{ij} = 0$ otherwise; $m_j = \sum_{k=1}^{n} L_{kj}$, the total number of nodes that node j points to; and d is an analyst-defined damping factor between 0 and 1. The damping factor d controls the relative influence of a node's immediate neighbors (we set $d = .85$ and in the online supplement show that the results remain similar across a range of d values). The scaling factor m_j is important for our purposes because it discounts edges originating from nodes that contribute many other edges. Because categories excluded from prioritization policies are the source of many edges, standardizing in this way prevents rarely prioritized categories from having excess influence.

Results. Figure 4 ranks categories according to their PageRank score.[8] To aid interpretation, we group categories into six buckets. Table 3 provides descriptions of the highest-ranked categories, and Appendix Table A1 provides descriptions of lower-ranked categories.

The results show that housing authorities tend to prioritize applicants with preexisting ties to the local community or who are "in the

Table 3. Descriptions of Most Highly Ranked Categories across Housing Authorities

Category	PageRank	Description
Resident	.087	The applicant resides or works within a specified geographic area. Policies vary on what factors establish residency, such as the length of residency required to qualify. Geographic areas may not be smaller than a county or municipality.
Disability	.075	At least one member of the family has a disability. Some policies further differentiate on the basis of which member of the household has a disability.
Tenant in PHA program	.074	Participants in programs administered by the housing authority.
Elderly	.061	At least one family member is age 62 or older. Many policies require the elderly family member to be the head or co-head of the household.
Organizational referral or affiliation	.059	Requires a referral from or an affiliation with another outside organization (typically a social service organization).
Veteran	.049	Veterans and their families.
Homelessness	.046	The applicant meets HUD's definition of homelessness.
Displaced due to disaster/fire	.044	Displaced due to a federally recognized natural disaster or wildfire.
Domestic violence	.040	Families in which members have recently experienced domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking. Policies differ on what counts as recent and what kinds of incidents qualify.
Displaced due to gov't action	.038	Displaced due to government action, such as code enforcement, eminent domain, or a public improvement or development program.
Terminated due to insufficient funding	.031	Past Section 8 subsidy recipients who were terminated from the program due to insufficient program funding.
Working	.030	Families where the head of household, co-head, or sole member is working. Policies vary on what qualifies as working, setting different weekly work-hour minimums.

system" due to their interactions with formal institutions. Specifically, residency in the local geographic area ranks highest, followed by several categories related to applicants' connections to formal organizations and institutions: current and former participants in housing authority programs; applicants receiving services from or referred by other local organizations;[9] veterans; applicants who are working, receiving training, or in school; and people in witness protection programs. These choices tend to reinforce existing institutional relationships and commitments rather than expand the pool of people served, as further exemplified by the comparatively low ranking of applicants not currently receiving housing assistance.

Some category rankings align with literature on who is considered deserving in the U.S. welfare state; others are less readily explained by broadly circulated notions of moral worth alone. Consistent with expectations, veterans and groups popularly understood as unable rather than unwilling to work (e.g., elderly people and people with disabilities) are highly ranked,[10] and some groups appearing in the lower ranks are maligned in welfare state discourses and housing markets (Katz 2013; Rosen et al. 2021), such as single-headed households, applicants living with HIV/AIDS, people who are unemployed or underemployed, people with substance-use challenges, and people who were previously incarcerated.

Yet, contrary to the deservingness literature, working applicants, one of the groups most strongly associated with deservingness (Iceland 2013; Moffitt 2015; Watkins-Hayes and Kovalsky 2017), do not top the rankings. Indeed, they rank behind two stigmatized groups: people experiencing homelessness and victims of domestic violence (Phelan et al. 1997; Sweet 2019). And despite the prominence of concerns about dependency in welfare debates (Somers and Block 2005), housing authorities more highly prioritize people who currently receive or previously received housing assistance than people who have never received assistance. More broadly, housing authorities appear to intermingle logics of deservingness and logics of need. Groups facing acute displacement due to factors outside their control, such as natural disasters and government action, receive high priority, whereas more pervasive chronic forms of need, such as high rent burden or unstable housing, receive less priority.

Categories listed in the Code of Federal Regulations also frequently appear at the top. Although a small minority of housing authorities institute more novel preferences, our results as a whole suggest that structures that pre-approve particular categories result in some degree of standardization within decentralized programs.

Which Categories Condition Eligibility for Greater Priority?

Housing authorities often require that applicants meet the criteria for multiple categories to qualify for greater priority, such as when they extend preferences to rent-burdened workers or veterans experiencing homelessness. To represent how housing authorities combine categorical requirements to narrow who qualifies, we transform our codes into a co-occurrence network. Pooling across housing authorities, we draw a non-directed edge between two categories each time a preference requires that an applicant satisfies both categories to be prioritized. For example, given a preference for "elderly veterans," we draw an edge between "elderly" and "veteran." When multiple preferences draw the same edge between two nodes, we increase the weight of that edge by 1.

Based on this network, we identify categories that most condition eligibility for priority using Opsahl, Agneessens, and Skvoretz's (2010) generalization of degree centrality (Freeman 1978) for un-directed weighted networks, calculated as follows:

$$C_D^{w\alpha}(i) = k_i^{1-\alpha} \times s_i^{\alpha}$$

where i is a focal node, k is the number of nodes that node i is connected to, s is the sum of the edge weights of all edges connected to i (node strength), and α is a tuning parameter that determines the relative contribution of k and s. We set $\alpha = .5$ to allow unique connections and stronger connections to add to a node's degree centrality. Categories with a high degree centrality are widely used by housing authorities as building blocks for narrowing who gains priority.

Results. Figure 5 presents the co-occurrence network, with the size of nodes scaled to reflect each category's degree centrality. Three categories at the center emerge as the most important building blocks of preferences: applicants with a referral or receiving services from an external organization; local residency; and participants in other housing authority–administered programs. This indicates that qualifying for a preference is often conditioned on whether an applicant is in the housing authority's organizational universe, already resides in the area, or has ties to the housing authority itself. Other categories with high degree centralities reflect groups commonly elevated as deserving in welfare discourses, including applicants with disabilities, elderly people, and veterans. As these categories are frequently paired with many others, they further narrow those offered priority to people in groups more often served by other federal social programs.

Figure 6 presents a secondary analysis to further unpack the logic by which housing authorities tend to limit who qualifies for

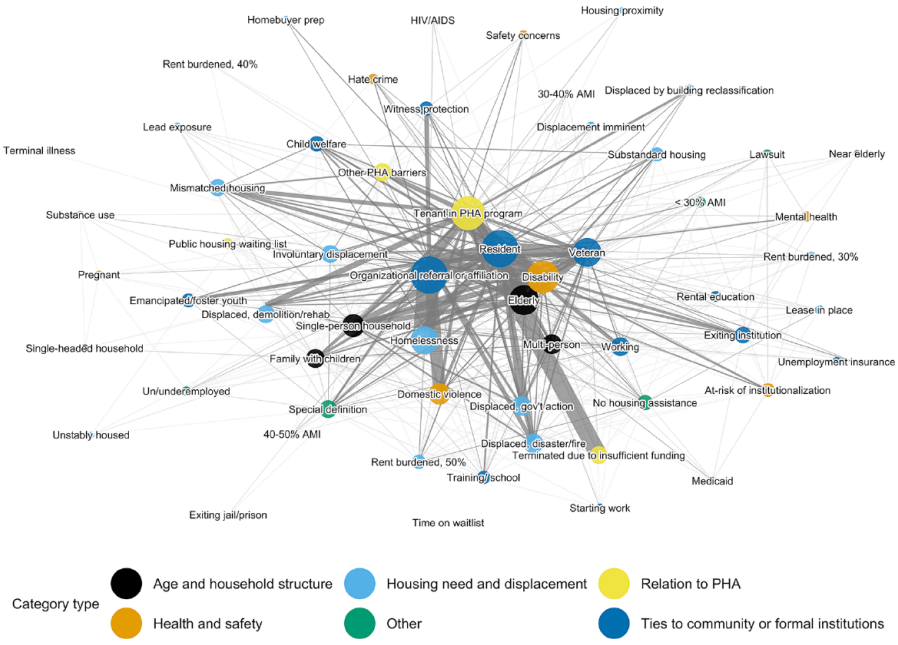


Figure 5. Map of Co-occurrences
Note: Edge widths reflect the number of times connected categories are paired within preferences. Node sizes are scaled according to each category's degree centrality. The online supplement provides the degree centrality for all categories and illustrates how degree centrality varies for a range of α values.

priority. It displays categories that on their own rarely or never qualify an applicant for priority, along with the category each is most often coupled with to qualify an applicant for priority. These results reveal two ways that preferences involving more inclusive or generous categories are made conditional. First, the figure indicates that when housing authorities prioritize more stigmatized categories, such as homelessness, child welfare system–involved families, people living with HIV/AIDS, substance use, mental health challenges, unemployment, and single-headed households, they restrict eligibility to subpopulations defined by highly central categories, like applicants with external referrals, local residents, current housing authority tenants, and applicants with children. Second, when housing authorities prioritize groups whose current housing situations could be enhanced to provide a better platform for well-being and mobility, such as people preparing for homeownership, who live far from their workplaces, or who live in housing mismatched to their needs, they often focus this help on households the housing authority already serves. Thus, housing authorities reinforce their ongoing commitments and double down on tenants who have already been screened successfully for help.

These results underscore the significant extent to which applicants' existing community, organizational, and institutional ties offer a leg up for achieving priority. When housing authorities innovate or prioritize riskier categories, they layer on requirements to offset their risk, such as by requiring an external entity to vouch for an applicant's worthiness. We investigate the forces that contribute to these choices in our interviews with housing authority officials.

PART II: VARIATION ACROSS PRIORITIZATION POLICIES

We identify distinct clusters of prioritization policies by representing each housing authority's prioritization policy as a separate

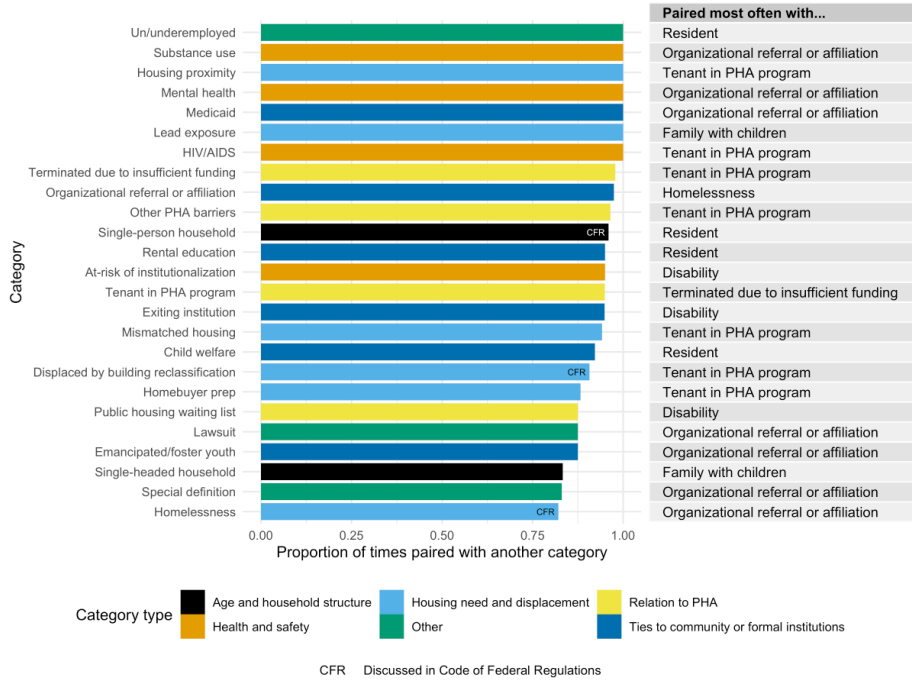


Figure 6. Most Contingent Categories
Note: Top 25 categories by proportion of instances the category appears in a preference paired with one or more other categories. The table on the right shows the category with which each category on the left is most often paired.

directed network graph, measuring the distance between each pair of graphs, and grouping the graphs based on these distances. To construct each network graph, we start with the same procedure we used to represent how categories are arranged hierarchically, drawing directed edges that point from lower-ranked categories to higher-ranked ones. But here we do not aggregate edges across housing authorities. Instead, we construct a separate graph for each housing authority. For housing authorities with no preferences, we construct a graph that contains nodes for all the categories in our analysis, but draw no edges between them.

We measure the pairwise distance between each housing authority's preference graph based on centrality distance (Roy, Schmid, and Tredan 2014). Note that here we measure the distance between network graphs, rather than the distances between nodes within a network graph. The centrality distance, $d_C(G_i, G_j)$, between graphs G_i and G_j with the centrality function C is given as follows:

$$d_C\left(G_i, G_j\right) = \sum_{v \in V} \left| C\left(G_i, v\right) - C\left(G_j, v\right) \right|$$

where V is the set of all nodes in our graphs and v is a given node. We again use PageRank as the measure of centrality. Intuitively, this measure reflects how differently any two prioritization policies rank individual categories. Identical policies have a distance of 0. We selected this metric because it captures differences between policies in terms of our analytic focus—how policies rank different categories—and is defined for comparisons involving graphs with no edges, as with housing authorities without preferences.

We then apply k-medoid clustering, an unsupervised machine learning method, to identify distinct groups of policies. We use the partitioning around medoids algorithm, which divides the prioritization policy graphs into k clusters. K-medoid clustering is similar to k-means clustering but is less sensitive to outliers and works with any distance metric. We set $k = 6$ based on average silhouette

Table 4. Six Clusters of Prioritization Policies

Cl #	Label	Top 5 Categories by Median PageRank Score	Median Levels of Priority	Median # of Preferences	% of All Policies in Cluster
1	No preferences	none [all have same median score]	0	0	39
2	Minimal, existing tenants	1. tenant in PHA program; 2. terminated due to insufficient funding [all rest have same median score]	1	2	6
3	Minimal, residency	1. resident [all rest have same median score]	1	2	9
4	Semi-elaborate, standard suite	1. disability; 1. elderly; 3. resident; 4. working; 5. veteran	1	4	12
5	Elaborate, emphasis on displacement	1. displaced, disaster or fire; 2. disability; 3. displaced, government action; 4. resident; 5. elderly	2	7	18
6	Elaborate, emphasis on institutional ties	1. tenant in PHA program; 2. organizational referral; 3. disability; 4. resident; 5. homelessness	4	8	14

Note: PageRank calculated with damping factor = .85. Clusters numbered in increasing order of elaboration.

width and our assessment of the coherence and interpretability of the resulting clusters.[11]

Results: Prioritization Policy Clusters

Table 4 presents the six clusters of prioritization policies. The Appendix includes exemplars of the clusters: Table A2 shows the medoids, that is, the prioritization policy graph within each cluster that is the closest, on average, to all the other graphs in the cluster, and Figure A1 maps select housing authorities in each cluster.

Table 4 indicates that many housing authorities exercised classificatory restraint. Clusters 1, 2, and 3 consist of policies with no or very minimal preferences. They collectively make up 55 percent of the policies in the sample.

Of these clusters, Cluster 1 is the least elaborate, with 95 percent of housing authorities having no preferences.[12] Cluster 2 is the second least elaborate, with a majority of policies featuring only a single preference that covers a narrow population of current or former housing authority tenants. Of these, 90 percent have a preference for applicants who had lost assistance when the housing authority faced a funding shortfall. Cluster 3 is also fairly simple; 68 percent of these policies have two or fewer unique preferences. They are distinguished by highly prioritizing current residents; 95 percent place residency in the top rank, either alone or in combination with other categories.

Cluster 4 policies tend to be more elaborate than those in Clusters 1, 2, and 3, but less elaborate than those in Clusters 5 and 6, with 67 percent having between two and five preferences. Four highly prioritized categories appear in more than half of policies: applicants with disabilities, elderly applicants, residents, and working applicants. All are explicitly discussed in the Code of Federal Regulations. Together with veterans, the fifth highest ranked category, these preferences also broadly align with groups popularly understood as deserving in the welfare state literature.

Policies in Clusters 5 and 6 tend to be the most elaborate and account for about 33 percent of all policies. Both tend to incorporate more unique preferences and highly prioritize

applicants with disabilities and residents. Cluster 5 prioritizes acute external housing crises more highly, such as displacement, while Cluster 6 policies prioritize applicants based on institutional ties more highly, particularly current/former housing authority tenants and applicants with external organizational referrals or affiliations. Cluster 6 policies also differ from others by more often prioritizing applicants experiencing homelessness, with 71 percent having a preference for this group.

Results: Patterns in Cluster Membership

Table 5 presents descriptive statistics for the housing authorities in each policy cluster and shows that the clusters are patterned by the size of local voucher programs, certain service area characteristics, and geographic region.[13] The greatest contrast we observe is between housing authorities in the two extremes of elaboration, Clusters 1 and 6. Cluster 1 housing authorities operate the smallest voucher programs and tend to serve areas that are more rural and conservative. They are disproportionately located in the South and tend to serve areas with significant economic need but less severe affordable housing shortages. Cluster 6 housing authorities tend to have the largest voucher programs and serve areas that are more non-White, urban, and liberal. Some of the country's largest housing authorities are in this cluster, including the New York City Housing Authority and the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles. These housing authorities are disproportionately in the West and serve areas with high median incomes and the greatest unmet need for affordable housing.[14]

Beyond these two clusters on the extremes, patterns of cluster membership challenge past research on decentralization that suggests local prioritization choices are a straightforward function of service area characteristics. For instance, the elaboration and substance of prioritization patterns do not have a consistent relationship with the ethnoracial composition of service areas. When it comes to local political conditions, two of the least elaborate clusters (2 and 3) and two of the most elaborate clusters (5 and 6) skew more liberal. Nor do we find substantial variation in several indicators for the scale of local demand for assistance, such as poverty and unemployment rates. Other indicators, such as the percent of households receiving other forms assistance and the number of affordable units per 100 households with incomes at or below 30 percent of the area median, exhibit more variation across clusters, but no clear pattern beyond the extremes.

Cluster memberships exhibit a more consistent pattern based on a few organizational factors, especially the size of voucher programs. Housing authorities in clusters with more elaborate policies tend to run larger voucher programs and serve more units overall. The notable exception to this pattern is Cluster 2, which is composed of larger housing authorities that have minimal preferences. These patterns suggest that size tends to shape prioritization approaches, but larger size does not mechanically lead to more elaborate policies.

Housing authorities in clusters of more elaborate policies (i.e., Clusters 4, 5, and 6) also tend to be situated in places with stronger local inter-organizational networks organized around housing issues, as proxied by the presence of a local or regional Continuum of Care. These more elaborate policies use a wider array of categories. Policies in Clusters 5 and 6, in particular, prioritize several categories that are targets of inter-organizational collaborative structures that receive comparatively less or no priority in other clusters: people experiencing homelessness, child welfare system-involved families, and people living with HIV/AIDS. They also rely on external referrals or service receipt more often than do policies in other clusters, with 60 percent of Cluster 5 and 80 percent of Cluster 6 policies including at least one preference with such a criterion. The density of local community and human services organizations overall does not have a consistent pattern, although these

Table 5. Characteristics of Housing Authorities in Prioritization Policy Clusters

	Less Elaborate			More Elaborate		
	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6
Medoid	WY013	AL047	WI246	IA002	NJ063	CA123
Observations	552	88	131	168	257	202
% of vouchers administered in cluster	16	8	5	5	21	31
Housing Authority Size						
Vouchers administered	180	724	349	356	758	1,440
Total units served	340	1,186	494	589	1,101	1,830
Service Area: Demographics						
% White alone	76	71	78	75	75	70
% Black alone	4	8	3	5	5	6
% Asian alone	1	2	2	2	2	3
% Hispanic	5	7	7	7	7	11
% Veteran	9	8	8	9	9	8
% Below poverty	16	15	13	15	15	15
% Unemployed	7	7	7	6	7	7
% Receiving SSI/TANF/SNAP	31	28	24	26	28	27
Median household income	$46,793	$52,420	$57,126	$53,327	$52,616	$57,829
Service Area: Housing Market						
Median rent burden %	30	31	30	30	30	30
% Units renter-occupied	30	35	33	32	34	36
% Units vacant	14	11	9	11	10	9
% Census tracts in metropolitan area	59	98	97	95	98	98
# Affordable per 100, without assistance	29	19	18	18	21	16
# Affordable per 100, with assistance	57	47	49	48	50	40
Service Area: Organizations						
# Community nonprofits per 1,000	.83	1.10	1.33	1.12	1.06	1.09
# Human services organizations per 1,000	3.20	4.62	6.00	4.58	4.35	4.31
% with local-level Continuum of Care	47	67	71	69	69	74
Service Area: Politics						
% Republican vote, 2016	60	45	45	54	48	42
Region						
% Midwest	26	26	31	32	25	21
% Northeast	16	31	40	22	24	21
% South	50	27	14	35	33	25
% West	8	16	16	11	18	33

measures may not be granular enough to fully capture variation in housing authorities' universe of organizational peers.

Overall, these results indicate substantial heterogeneity across clusters. However, despite patterns at the extremes of the clusters, prioritization policies are more than just a reflection of service area characteristics.

PART III: INTERVIEWS WITH HOUSING AUTHORITY OFFICIALS AND CONSULTANTS

This section draws on interviews with housing authority administrators to understand the processes underlying the patterns in local

prioritization policies we identified: substantial exercise of classificatory restraint, especially among smaller housing authorities, and policies that tend to favor applicants with existing ties to the housing authority, partner organizations, and local community. We illustrate how the elaboration and substance of prioritization policies reflect the local context of administration and officials' responses to varying intersections of intra-organizational, inter-organizational, and vertical forces.

Results: Elaboration

Administrative capacity constraints encourage simple policies. Housing authority officials commonly saw elaborate prioritization policies as more administrative work, something to avoid. For smaller housing authorities, elaborate policies would further strain already over-burdened staff. One respondent at a Southern housing authority with five full-time employees explained why they only instituted a few simple preferences: "All our hands are pretty full with the entire housing authority process. . . . We don't have whole departments that can come up with these schemes and verify all this stuff. I have one person, so we need to make it as simple as possible." Similarly, a respondent who helped several East Coast housing authorities administer their HCV Programs observed that smaller housing authorities were keen to keep their waiting list policies straightforward:

> They're small housing authorities . . . they only have the 14 [vouchers]. Every single time that we go to open up a waiting list . . . we could do the analysis of what the housing need is in that community, but ultimately . . . you have so many needs that it's like, "Just keep it plain." It was too much with the tracking and the administrative part of it. For them, it's just that much easier to keep it so that everybody has the same playing field.

Although officials expressed interest in aligning preferences with technocratic reviews of community needs or their beliefs about who would make a "good" program participant, many smaller agencies deemed the cost of adding preferences too steep. Because decision-makers often worked shoulder-to-shoulder with the people who would have to implement preferences, they understood the negative consequences elaborate policies would have on the workloads of their front-line colleagues. Thus, the practical realities of implementation costs tempered impulses to condition assistance on granular forms of differentiation.

Front-line entanglements and feedback unsettle the legitimacy of setting priorities. Officials charged with making local policy choices regularly cited their own and their colleagues' front-line experiences as the reasons for their approach to preferences. For some, the messiness of on-the-ground categorization was unsettling. As one respondent observed, "[P]eople kind of fall in between categories and you don't know what to do." In these settings, the inadequacy of category-based systems to capture social realities was clear.

Many respondents were also conscious of the costs of category-based prioritization on applicants, which they often gleaned when talking to applicants seeking updates on their waitlist position. Consistent with research on applicant perspectives (Keene et al. 2021; Rita et al. 2022), officials observed that deviating from a first-come first-served approach generated distrust and confusion. As an official in a major U.S. city pointed out, "People really know when they went on that list, and our applicants tend to know each other, so you get a lot of, 'Well, my friend applied when I did, how come this?"' Another respondent, who directed several small housing authorities in highly conservative areas, explained how preferences lead to difficult conversations:

> It's an awkward thing to have to administer the program and have to explain to people why they were 90 in the waiting list last

> month, and now they're 120. . . . There's a basic distrust at times about government programs, and so they are very conscious about trying to keep an eye on their application and know where they're at on the waiting list. Is anything goofy going on?

Beyond spurring distrust, officials also raised concerns that fluctuating waiting list positions could damage applicant well-being. One official explained the implications from the applicant perspective:

> You all of a sudden get a letter stating you were number five and now you're 375. You know that the reality of that hurt a lot. For some, it sent them into a spiral because they were so close . . . and now it's going to be years and they've been on those waitlists for years waiting to come up to the top.

Officials from a variety of housing authorities explained how front-line experiences help them see the potential negative consequences of elaborate categorization schemes on applicants. But these concerns had less impact on the choices of larger, more professionalized housing authorities. Officials there had more specialized roles that took them further from the front line. They more often viewed priority-setting as a technocratic obligation: "For me it's about doing the research, for your town, your city . . . what is the need?" Rather than abolish preferences, several of these housing authorities just stopped offering applicants updates on their waitlist positions.

Officials at other housing authorities, especially smaller ones, expressed deep reservations about whether local decision-makers should even be setting priorities. These respondents framed preferences as unnatural interventions akin to playing God with neighbors. One official suggested that preferences would "step in between" people and government programs. Echoing a number of other respondents, he questioned, "How do we judge what is more important than something else? It's a very difficult thing." The housing authority he ran adopted a few rarely used preferences that covered emergency situations; they processed the vast majority of applicants according to the time and date of application. The official described this as a "very fair process, in that I understand that I have to wait my turn." He further stressed that his organization's "commitment to time and date was not laziness," or an attempt to avoid extra work, but rather a considered choice to "keep ourselves out of controlling who gets the assistance as much as possible."

The head of a small Texan housing authority with only one other staff member similarly contested the notion that a lack of preferences reflected a lack of care or a simple desire to minimize staff work. In fact, she suggested that application order was *in*convenient and emotionally taxing. She personally wanted to create a preference for elderly applicants. However, after younger applicants argued that they also have pressing needs, she concluded that application order was "more fair," noting that "the elderly people know that if they want to be close to the top of the list, they've got to be here early and they have to stand in line just like anybody else." However, sticking to this policy is difficult:

> There's lots of frustration on both sides. On my side and the applicant. But you just have to have a way to do it and you have to stick to that. You can never do a favor for anybody. It's really hard, you have to be strong. I've had people leave crying and I've sat down and cried for a little while. Then I get up and go back to work.

This official highlighted the difficulties of carrying out arms-length administration in a small community. For her and other officials, defaulting to application order represents an easy-to-understand, impersonal approach that avoids casting judgment on neighbors.

The collapsed distance between applicants, front-line staff, and policymakers at the local level makes the social consequences of deciding whether to advance certain applicants before others more salient. Housing authority officials crafted policies that recognize the

fraught social meanings of formally establishing priority groups.

Inter-organizational relationships extend community knowledge and lower categorization costs. Officials at more urban and suburban housing authorities often worked in communities with significant organizational infrastructure. They recognized peer organizations as community representatives and sources of community knowledge (Levine 2016) able to bring issues to their attention that then increased the elaborateness of their preferences. As one respondent put it: "We're really assessing what need is out there, where are the gaps in housing and what can we potentially do to help bridge those gaps." Through meetings, personal relationships, and joint needs assessments with organizational peers, housing authority officials who are part of strong inter-organizational networks made sense of whether distinct groups in the community faced special challenges. Acting on this information and creating corresponding preferences allowed housing authorities to solidify relationships with other organizations. For instance, some wanted to support peer organizations by always being "on the lookout for things that can help with the needs of our community organizations." Others saw working together as a way to show commitment to collaborative efforts like local Continuums of Care. By contrast, housing authorities that lacked a pool of local organizations to define community needs and serve as partners faced fewer lateral pressures to create preferences.

Strong local organizational infrastructure also enabled capacity-strapped organizations to outsource the burdensome work of categorizing applicants. Officials said they often weighed whether to add preferences based on local relationships. They evaluated whether nearby peers could verify an applicant belonged to particular categories or refer those in need of help. When such agencies did not exist, over-extended housing authorities often saw adding more preferences as impractical.

Results: Substance

Performance pressures from above intersect with administrative capacity limits to promote safer bets. Faced with internal capacity constraints and vertical pressures from federal performance metrics that incentivized high lease-up rates, some housing authorities strategically prioritized applicants who they thought were more market-ready (McCabe 2023) and likely to succeed in the HCV Program. Officials across a range of housing authorities discussed lease-up rates as a key concern, with one noting that they monitor waitlist activity "very, very closely, obviously trying to maximize our lease up." In their telling, prioritizing applicants who are more likely to secure and maintain rental housing on the private market had multiple benefits: it boosted their metrics, reduced the extra work generated by program turnover, and aligned with their vision of efficiently managing scarce resources.

Some housing authorities saw preferences as a quality control tool. They sought to limit tenants they considered risky bets, mirroring the screening practices of landlords (Rosen et al. 2021). One executive director recounted a time when her housing authority briefly experimented with having no preferences: "it was creating a lot more work in the long run because of the turnover." Hesitantly, she added that new participants during that time were more likely to be "criminals or whatever—they would get on the program and then within two months we would catch them selling drugs out of the apartment door." Observing that "more people violated their obligations," she reinstated a preference for working applicants, who she claimed follow rules and "appreciate the help more." Although these statements may be read as drawing contrasts based on deservingness, the official did not draw on deservingness stereotypes to enforce moral boundaries for their own sake. Instead, the official drew boundaries to help solve a practical problem: how to reduce turnover-related work.

Other housing authorities prioritized high-need populations but limited eligibility in

ways that hedged the risk of serving them. One official explained that high-need applicants have "bad tenant history, broken leases, things that prevent them from finding a unit. . . . They need more services than we can provide. Someone to walk them through budgeting and that you have to pay for the lights to be on." Given this, officials conditioned preferences for high-need subgroups with the requirement that those applicants receive external services. Housing authorities discussed, for instance, the integral role that organizational partners play in helping voucher recipients with experiences of homelessness:

> We found high turnover and very low success among individuals that are currently or formerly homeless. . . . It's more than just receiving a voucher. There's other wraparound services that are required, so we really wanted to just take a holistic approach. . . . We are a piece to the puzzle, but we are not the only solution. It's really important that we also let our fellow members of the community assist us . . . and to be realistic about the types of services that we are providing.

Highlighting the limits of what vouchers and housing authorities can offer, officials relied on external service providers to bridge the gap between their ideas of who needed help the most and which potential tenants would do well in the program. This resulted in a form of cream-skimming, where applicants who were seen as surer bets were promoted to the front of the line.

Locally inflected deservingness constructs inform choices. Ideas about the moral standing of different applicants also informed prioritization choices, but the constructs often took on distinctly local inflections. Priority-setting at the local level encourages officials to place moral value on belonging to their local geographic area. Even though federal HCV Program rules require housing authorities to accept applicants regardless of their place of residence, agencies can *prioritize* applicants based on residency. Many officials pointed out that peer housing authorities use residency preferences. They suggested it was obvious or "pretty standard" to reserve vouchers for one's own residents, while casting others as illegitimate outsiders. In particular, housing authorities in communities neighboring major metropolitan areas described fears that a mass of urban residents could crowd out locals. They worried these outsider applicants were more likely to move back to the city with their voucher after a year; these applicants would then be more expensive to serve, because rents are higher in the city. One official in a small California community recalled asking, "How do we have so many people from LA [Los Angeles]?" Another explained, "It's just a numbers game when you border a metropolitan area with three million people. We would sometimes just get carloads of people that would come down. . . . [Helping them] wouldn't be meeting our mission of providing decent, safe and affordable housing to the citizens of [interviewee's] County."

A number of officials at housing authorities with residency preferences acknowledged that, as one put it, "out-of-town people . . . because they're so far down the list, the chances of them receiving a voucher is very slim." Yet despite the strong potential of residency preferences to produce de facto racial exclusion given significant residential segregation in the United States, housing authorities showed little concern for violating the Fair Housing Act. The only interviewees who broached the topic were consultants, whose job requires staying up to speed with FHA compliance. They described telling some housing authorities that "whether it was intentional or not," residency preferences could be seen as "keep[ing] people out who were coming in from these inner-city areas." Yet, despite these racially coded warnings, these consultants conceded that the appeal of residency preferences was hard to overcome: "When you're given this pot of money and this many vouchers, who is it you most

want to help but the people who are in your community?" Although lawsuits have challenged residency preferences as violations of the Fair Housing Act (Schwemm 2017), housing authorities continue to adopt them because decentralization to this level makes geographic boundaries especially meaningful dividing lines.[15]

When speaking about preferences for groups commonly constructed as deserving, such as veterans and working families, officials' stated rationales often drew on long-standard themes, such as discouraging dependency. The mechanisms by which these constructs get incorporated into policy, however, involve several specific local processes. Whereas formal community needs assessments more often informed the policies of larger, more professionalized housing authorities, relationships between influential individuals and specific valorized populations more often informed the policies of smaller housing authorities. To explain a veteran preference, an interviewee at a small Midwestern housing authority stated, "[T]he executive director actually happens to be a veteran himself. My father, [also] a veteran. So . . . creating a special preference for veterans, that took no thought at all." The consultants who had worked with hundreds of housing authorities confirmed that this dynamic was pervasive: "They just have their pet projects. . . . [T]hey want to see that a certain population is served."

In some conservative areas, officials described preferences for working applicants as a way to build greater acceptance of housing authority activities. Housing authority boards tend not to be involved with the minutiae of policies like preferences, but they do steer the overarching direction of local programs. Some officials highlighted tensions with more conservative boards that were opposed to housing assistance altogether. A rural Midwest housing authority official described how a board member asked, "Why are we opening the waiting list? Can't we just not open it again and let Section 8 fade away?" To counter this resistance, she used preferences to make the participants appear more palatable to the board:

> When you have somebody who just flat out doesn't want to have your program, you have to talk to them about why you do this. So, every year . . . we're comparing ourselves with other Section 8 programs in the state. Look at them. Here's the average percentage of people who are on public assistance. We have more people working, we have fewer people on public assistance. There's the stereotype about people who are on public assistance, that they're all sitting around doing nothing, and you can look at these numbers and know that's not the case.

The official acknowledged she was more liberal and saw preferences as a compromise to make the local jurisdiction look good relative to other jurisdictions along dimensions important to board members. Overall, these results illustrate how moral concerns cement geographic insider-outsider distinctions and how idiosyncratic local processes shape the ideas of deservingness that inform local policies.

Verification concerns promote referrals and categories backed by organizational infrastructure. When officials evaluate a prospective preference, they weigh how much work it would take to ascertain which applicants qualify and consider how greatly potential categorization errors would compromise the integrity of their waitlists. Nearly all officials saw some categories as straightforward and easy to implement, notably many of the most central categories identified in our quantitative analysis. These tend to be categories backed by standardized external definitions and national bureaucratic verification mechanisms, such as disability and elderly,[16] and internal-facing categories where housing authorities can confirm statuses using their own records, such as current and former housing authority tenants. Officials had little to report when asked what administrative frictions come with these

categories. As a result, when a category had local interest, little stood in the way of it becoming policy.

Categories without a robust verification infrastructure were seen as more costly and risky. Consequently, housing authorities adopted categories like homelessness, victim of domestic violence, and victim of natural disasters when other local organizations had the expertise to verify an applicant's status. This substantiates our quantitative results, which indicated that priority was only granted to applicants who fell within these categories and had an accompanying external referral.

Officials gave different rationales for relying on external referrals. Some worried about incorrectly excluding eligible people. One respondent who worked in a large housing authority in the Pacific Northwest hypothesized that households view housing authorities as the "scary arm" of the state and were thus less comfortable sharing sensitive statuses with them:

> It's hard [for us] to be that regulatory agency and be the social service agency at the same time and build that trust that's needed with the client. . . . Folks are oftentimes more comfortable with their case manager or the person that they've been working with through the system; they are more readily able to admit what their situation actually is [to them]. To [us], a stranger, they might not be comfortable saying "I'm homeless."

She then noted, "[t]his is a transient population, right" and emphasized the unique value of service partners: "They are able to create more consistent relationships with folks that are currently experiencing homelessness and be able to locate them." Housing authority officials generally understood they lack the expertise and structural position to ensure marginalized individuals eligible for priority were not overlooked.

Many other officials required referrals because they thought external experts could better root out fraud. For instance, an official at a housing authority with a preference for victims of natural disasters stated that she knew some applicants claiming to be victims were not actually victims. A major flood had hit the area and, although she feared it sounded "ugly," she needed external partners to identify the "true" victims:

> I needed them to vet them [the applicants] because I couldn't. Those agencies knew whether the families had been in the flood because they had either given them assistance or they had put them up somewhere. That's something that I couldn't do. . . . If you're going to open up something like that [a preference for disaster victims], everyone's affected by the flood.

This official's observation exemplifies a more subtle dynamic that led to reliance on external referrals: officials equate receiving external services for a category with the very definition of that category. This is also illustrated by a respondent who discussed *removing* the preference for households experiencing homelessness because of the lack of a shelter in town:

> The verification for that preference is a statement from the shelter, so we're sort of at a moot point here. We have people coming in arguing that they're having to stay with relatives or whatever. . . . They consider themselves homeless because they don't have homes. . . . But according to the way our verification is worded, it has to be a statement from a shelter. . . . They don't have that because they're not staying in a shelter.

This official found it hard to separate the category of homelessness from receiving shelter services. Rather than redesign their policies to create another way to qualify for a homelessness preference, the official said they were looking to strike the preference altogether.

Thus, housing authorities conserve their capacity by choosing easy-to-implement preferences and handing off more complex ones to others for assessing applicants' "true"

statuses. Regardless of intent, these strategies further turn categories like "homelessness" into more conditional preferences like "homelessness and actively receiving shelter services." In the process, these choices prioritize applicants who are in the system, such as the more advantaged households who succeed at navigating disaster relief bureaucracies (Raker 2020).

DISCUSSION

We use the case of Housing Choice Vouchers, a resource rationed by local bureaucracies, to examine how decentralized social provision shapes who gets what and when. Focusing on the meso-level classification schemes that bureaucracies develop to manage resource shortages, we show how organizational choices concerning whether and how to draw categorical distinctions among help-seekers create differential access to this valuable form of assistance. We find that local organizations' position within a matrix of three forces shapes their policy choices: intra-organizational dynamics of limited administrative capacity and reduced social distance between help-seekers, front-line workers, and local policymakers; horizontal relationships with other local organizations; and vertical pressures from anti-discrimination law and funders' performance metrics. These forces produced variation in local policy choices, but they also combined to generate two patterns in prioritization. First, they led many organizations, especially smaller ones, to exercise *classificatory restraint* when rationing help, refraining from using categories to set priorities or using only a limited set. Second, when organizations did set category-based priorities, policies often favored people connected to the local area and its social-service organizations and institutions.

The significant degree of classificatory restraint we observed stands in contrast to expectations from sociological research on the U.S. welfare state and similar liberal welfare states, which stresses that social provision is primarily organized around stratifying help according to perceptions of moral deservingness and tightening social control of the poor. This literature suggests that local organizations in the United States would draw fine distinctions among help-seekers when confronted with resource shortages. Our results show that although beliefs about deservingness shape some local choices, their influence is contingent on structural forces that affect the ease and appeal of elevating deservingness concerns above other objectives. In more conservative, less urban areas, worries about helping people thought to have lower moral standing are commonplace but often run up against practical administrative constraints and counterbalancing unease about "playing God" with neighbors. In more liberal, urban areas, elaborate schemes proliferate. There, highly ranked categories, such as individuals experiencing homelessness, reflect the belief that those in most need or who stand to benefit most from assistance are most deserving. These results indicate variation in both *who* is understood as deserving and the importance of deservingness relative to other organizational concerns.

Scholarship on how the decentralized structure of the U.S welfare state affects who gets what often focuses on high-level policy choices at the state level. Our findings challenge the notion that decentralization to lower levels replicates processes under decentralization to the state level. We outline the distinct matrix of forces that local policy choices are exposed to. We show how local choices often reflect immediate organizational problems of how to make do with limited capacity, build relationships with peers, and score well on performance metrics. Our analysis thus builds on calls from urban and organizational sociologists to analyze the role that local-level organizations play in the governance of poverty (Marwell and Morrissey 2020). Our results identify key elements of organizational context that influence policy choices and demonstrate why studies of decentralization should attend to how local organizations design policies in response to immediate organizational concerns.

Our finding that being in the system and legible to local organizations enhances access to a valuable benefit speaks to research on the consequences of being legible at the intersection of social service and punishment systems. This result foregrounds an important tension: legibility opens the door to state intrusion and punishment, but it also unlocks resources and care (Asad 2020; Fong 2020; Headworth 2021; Lara-Millán 2022; Lyon 2003; Sweet 2019). Our analysis further calls into question who is excluded and what burdens are imposed on people in need when policies favor those who are easier to categorize. In the case of housing assistance, individuals are easier to categorize as "homeless" if they make themselves legible to shelters (Rita et al. 2022), and as "victims of domestic violence" if they make themselves legible to law enforcement. Those who curate the information they share with institutional actors or avoid formal institutions due to negative experiences, concerns about unwanted intervention, and fears of surveillance and stigmatization (Asad 2020; Brayne 2014; Fong 2019, 2020; Haskins and Jacobsen 2017; Lageson 2016; Stuart 2016) can fail to secure the institutional recognition required for prioritized statuses.

Existing research further illustrates the know-how it takes for applicants to navigate complex prioritization policies and secure institutional advocates who can vouch that they are solid candidates for housing (Keene et al. 2021; Rita et al. 2022). This reliance on external verification and advocacy can condition assistance on people's engagement with therapeutic agencies that aim to "repair" subjects to align with dominant norms and expectations (Haney 2010; Polsky 1993; Sweet 2019). Such policy choices may push people toward disempowering and invasive institutional entanglements, and also exclude the most marginalized members of society (Comfort et al. 2015; Stuart 2016). As the receipt of external services is often itself subject to screening mechanisms and conditions, our results show how local policies can produce interlocking exclusions across systems.

Joining scholarship on how state and nonstate actors coproduce knowledge of communities (Loveman 2005; Rodríguez-Muñiz 2017), our results further reveal how local organizational infrastructure can lead to divergent policy choices by shaping understandings of community need and affecting what classification tasks housing authorities can outsource. Working together, local organizations make sense of their communities and buttress classification systems that undergird the differentiated treatment of citizens. Thus, our results build on broader efforts to understand how local organizations affect community outcomes (Allard 2009; Levine 2016; Marwell 2004; Sharkey et al. 2017), highlighting how they contribute to the knowledge infrastructure needed to sort people for assistance. These results further suggest it would be fruitful to compare the poverty governance approaches of major metropolitan areas with dense, high-capacity, inter-organizational networks against those of suburban and rural areas, where less extensive organizational infrastructure might limit local capacity to produce and integrate knowledge about populations in need (Allard 2017; Shapiro 2021). This contrast could clarify the degree to which portraits of modern poverty governance emphasizing linkages across systems hold under different organizational arrangements within the decentralized U.S. system.

More broadly, our study suggests the value of synthesizing research on governance strategies used across settings of low state capacity, from low-capacity pockets of the decentralized U.S. state to ones in developing states. Roychowdhury (2021), for instance, shows how law enforcement personnel in West Bengal, India, similarly prioritized the claims of individuals with organizational connections, albeit with different motivations in mind. Comparative scholarship could enhance our understanding of how local responses to limited capacity tend to make governmental assistance more accessible and responsive to some more than others across country contexts and policy domains.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our research has two important limitations. First, our sample is not representative of all housing authorities and under-covers small ones. In our sample, the proportion of housing authorities with preferences is substantially lower among those with small voucher programs (see Appendix Figure A2). If this pattern holds for housing authorities not in our sample, their addition would likely not significantly change our category centrality results, because they rely only on data from housing authorities with preferences. Our results would, however, likely understate the true proportion of housing authorities without preferences.

Second, due to data limitations, we cannot directly test how preferences contribute to demographic inequality in access to help. Most notably, we cannot directly investigate whether preferences produce disparate racial effects, a significant concern given scholarship demonstrating that social policies are less generous and more punitive in areas with larger Black populations (Soss et al. 2011). Our results do provide two pieces of suggestive evidence that policies may disproportionately advantage White help-seekers. First, prioritizing individuals who engage with social service institutions may disproportionately exclude racialized groups that are more likely to be system-involved and wary of formal record-keeping institutions (Brayne 2014). Second, housing authority officials sometimes offered racially coded justifications for their policies, such as filtering out "criminals" and, in predominantly White suburban and rural areas, preventing masses of out-of-town urban residents from crowding out locals. Their preferences may be relying on categories that are local proxies for race. Additional applicant-level data are needed to investigate this possibility and examine what racialized impacts prioritization choices may have.

Still, we propose that the matrix of forces we identified, along with the network approaches we demonstrated, can be used to describe and analyze triage in settings beyond the case of housing vouchers. In the U.S. context, our approach is transferable to a variety of high-stakes settings in which policies create hierarchies to allocate scarce resources, such as childcare subsidies (Bouek 2020), tutoring (Coffin and Rubin 2022), home- or community-based long-term care financed by Medicaid (Musumeci, Chidambaram, and Watts 2019), and vaccines (Chen et al. 2022). Beyond the United States, other liberal welfare states and universalist welfare states implementing austerity measures (Scruggs 2008) further add to the range of settings where local resource allocation dilemmas emerge. Researchers can apply the network methods we use to represent the structure of prioritization policies that result and identify patterns at scale. For policy scholars, this can enhance understanding of the often-subterranean choices localities make that affect access to assistance. For economic and cultural sociologists, these methods can help uncover variation in the moral orders that social provision practices sustain.

Future research examining the triage of goods other than housing vouchers could consider whether the cultural meanings attached to those goods intersect with the forces we identified to produce different prioritization approaches. Facing capacity constraints and performance pressures, officials sought to achieve "good matches" (Zelizer 2012), prioritizing helping applicants whose profiles aligned with their understandings of housing vouchers as a specific kind of government assistance. In particular, officials saw vouchers as market-facing subsidies that required voucher-recipients to be responsible and well-positioned to secure the buy-in of landlords (McCabe 2023).[17] Consequently, policies often advanced the applicants who officials believed would best meet those demands. In many jurisdictions, this led to policies favoring comparatively more advantaged applicants. Other goods, however, may come with different cultural meanings that affect officials' understandings of what a good match looks like and spur policies that follow different logics.

Another line of inquiry could more fully explore the implications of policy elaboration and classificatory restraint for inequality. On the one hand, elaborate prioritization policies can increase administrative burdens on applicants and deter marginalized applicants (Herd and Moynihan 2019). Categorization often subjects people to intrusive inquiries in exchange for state resources and may require people to contort their lives and narratives to fit institutional expectations (Sweet 2019). In the case of housing vouchers, Keene and colleagues (2021) show that requiring applicants to fit into bureaucratic boxes for priority can have pernicious consequences, such as prompting applicants to stay in shelters rather than with family to ensure that institutions continue to recognize their ongoing homelessness. On the other hand, elaborate prioritization policies can help target resources to those in greatest need. The alternative of greater reliance on lotteries and first-come first-served policies can hurt the chances of less-advantaged applicants who miss application windows or lack flexible schedules to stand in long lines at the housing authority (Office of Evaluation Sciences 2021; Persad et al. 2009). Future research could assess the relative strength of these counterbalancing dynamics and evaluate how they contribute to inequalities. In addition, scholars could further investigate front-line discretion over categorization. What kinds of front-line negotiation occur over proving membership in different categories? Which applicants face the most scrutiny (Headworth 2021)?

Ultimately, the strategies organizations use to resolve local resource shortages present important cases for interrogating how classification systems stratify access to valuable social goods and entrench particular forms of categorical inequality. When local entities are entrusted with the power to design allocation procedures, organizations' struggles to manage intersecting internal and external forces shape how they wield classification as a tool and juggle classification's benefits, uncertainties, and costs. As more areas of social provision are privatized, placed under local control, and underfunded, examining the classification choices local organizations make is increasingly important for understanding who gets what, when, and where in decentralized welfare states.

APPENDIX

Table A1. Descriptions of Lower-Ranked Categories across Housing Authorities

Category	PageRank	Description
Displaced due to demolition/ rehab	.025	Displaced due to the demolition or rehabilitation of a specific housing structure
Family with children	.020	Families with children
Involuntary displacement	.019	Displaced due to involuntary displacement of either unspecified nature or due to actions of landlord
Mismatched housing	.018	Applicant resides in an overcrowded or underfilled housing unit
Witness protection	.018	Part of witness protection program
Multi-person	.017	Multi-person households
Substandard housing	.016	Applicant currently resides in substandard housing
Single-person household	.014	Household consists of a single person
Emancipated/foster youth	.013	Emancipated youth or youth aging out of the foster care system (typically associated with the Family Unification Program)
Hate crime	.012	Applicant is the victim of a hate crime
Special definition	.012	A special category local to the specific area
Training/school	.012	Household head or co-head is in job training and/or pursuing further education. This preference is often described as covering families "on the road to work."
Child welfare	.011	Families involved with the child welfare system

(continued)

Table A1. *(continued)*

Category	PageRank	Description
Other PHA barriers	.011	Other housing authority–related barriers
Displaced by building re-classification	.010	Displaced because a specific housing structure was reclassified to serve another population. This might happen if a structure is designated for a specific group (e.g., the elderly), or if a project-based subsidy period has expired.
Exiting institution	.009	Applicant is transitioning from institutional care (excludes jail and prison)
Rent burdened, 50%	.008	Spending more than 50% of household income on rent
Safety concerns	.006	Applicant has been victim of a crime, subject to harassment or threats, or is otherwise in danger
< 30% AMI	.006	Household income falls below 30% of the area median income
At-risk of institutionalization	.006	Applicant is institutionalized, or at risk of institutionalization (living in or at risk of being placed in a nursing facility, long-term rehabilitation center, or hospital)
No housing assistance	.005	Applicant is not currently receiving any form of housing assistance
Mental health	.005	Applicant has an established mental health condition
Unemployment insurance	.005	Receiving unemployment insurance
Near elderly	.005	Household includes member(s) considered older, but that are not yet 62 (cut-offs vary)
Displacement imminent	.005	Households at imminent risk of displacement
Homebuyer prep	.004	Applicant is moving toward homeownership
Rent burdened, 30%	.004	Spending over 30% of household income on rent
Starting work	.004	Household head or co-head is about to begin work soon
Lease in place	.004	Applicant can apply voucher to the housing unit they currently rent
Rental education	.004	Enrolled in or completed special educational program on rental housing
Pregnant	.004	Applicant is pregnant
Lawsuit	.004	Applicant is beneficiary of a housing-related lawsuit or court order
HIV/AIDS	.004	Member of household lives with HIV/AIDS
Un/underemployed	.003	Applicant is unemployed or working few hours
Lead exposure	.003	Currently residing in or displaced from housing that exposed applicant to lead
Public housing waiting list	.003	Applicant is also on the public housing waiting list
Rent burdened, 40%	.003	Spending over 40% of household income on rent
Housing proximity	.003	Applicant will use voucher to relocate closer to work, education, or social services
40 to 50% AMI	.003	Household income falls between 40% and 50% of the area median income
30 to 40% AMI	.003	Household income falls between 30% and 40% of the area median income
Unstably housed	.003	Doubled up with family or friends, or otherwise unstably housed
Single-headed household	.003	The head of the household is single
Terminal illness	.003	Applicant has a terminal illness
Time on waitlist	.003	Applicant has been on voucher waitlist for a long time
Substance use	.003	Member of applicant household has experienced or is experiencing substance-use challenges
Medicaid	.003	Eligible or enrolled in Medicaid
Exiting jail/prison	.003	Exiting jail or prison

Table A2. Cluster Medoids

C1: WY013 Evanston Housing Authority
[No preference]

C2: AL047 Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville

Rank	Preference
1	terminated due to insufficient funding + tenant in PHA program

C3: WI246 Fond du Lac County Housing Authority

Rank	Preference
1	resident

C4: IA002 Charles City Housing and Redevelopment Authority

Rank	Preference
1	resident
1	working
1	elderly
1	disability

C5: NJ063 City of Vineland Housing Authority

Rank	Preference
1	resident
1	resident + veteran
1	resident + disability
1	domestic violence + organizational referral
1	displaced, disaster or fire
1	displaced, government action
1	elderly

C6: CA123 Housing Authority of the City of Pomona

Rank	Preference
1	veteran + elderly
1	veteran + disability
1	veteran + resident
1	veteran + resident + organizational referral + homelessness
1	veteran + resident + organizational referral + domestic violence
1	veteran + terminated due to insufficient funding + tenant in PHA program
2	elderly
2	disability
2	resident
2	resident + organizational referral + homelessness
2	resident + organizational referral + domestic violence
2	terminated due to insufficient funding + tenant in PHA program

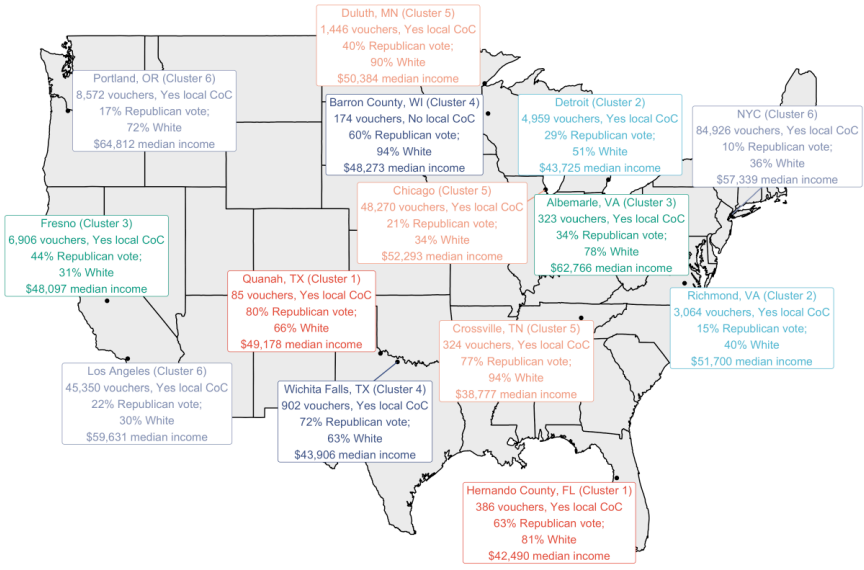


Figure A1. Map of Select Cluster Members
Note: The map highlights four large city PHAs that have been the focus of urban ethnographies and are part of the highly-elaborated cluster 6: Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, and Portland. For the remainder, it randomly samples from Clusters 1 to 5. % White refers to % non-Hispanic White alone.

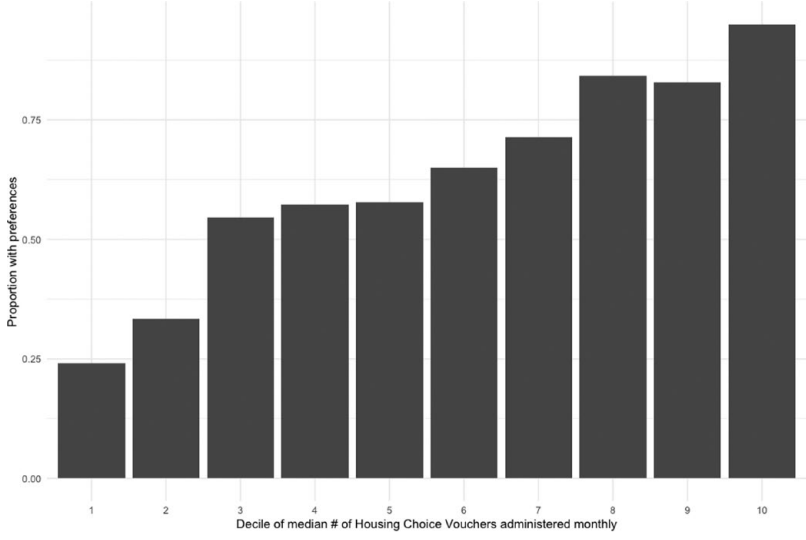


Figure A2. Proportion of Housing Authorities with Preferences by Housing Choice Voucher Program Size
Note: The figure plots the proportion of housing authorities in the analytic sample with one or more local preferences, dividing housing authorities into deciles based on the median number of Housing Choice Vouchers they administer monthly.

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Notes

1. Some state and local governments have added other protected categories, such as age, source of income, marital status, and veteran status.
2. Voucher payments are generally capped, however, based on fair market rents (i.e., rents that HUD deems reasonable for the local area).
3. HUD also competitively awards special purpose vouchers designated for specific populations, such as veterans experiencing homelessness. Housing authorities often create preferences to select people for those vouchers. Under certain conditions, some applicants may bypass the waitlist entirely. In this article, we focus on prioritization policies governing vouchers that are not restricted to specific populations and must be filled via a single central waitlist.
4. We did not use observations where the housing authority reported implementing preferences, because the survey does not provide enough information to capture full prioritization policies.
5. Defined as the housing authorities in the 50 states and the District of Columbia that administered HCV vouchers throughout April 2016 to March 2018.
6. Additional methodological detail and a summary of interviewee characteristics are available in the online supplement.
7. The online supplement provides further detail on the edge-drawing process.
8. The online supplement shows that these rankings are generally consistent with alternative edge weights and centrality measures. Table 6 in the online supplement also shows that these rankings are comparable if we weight by the proportion of HCV vouchers affected by a given preference policy.
9. In our coding, "organizational referral or affiliation" includes ongoing and past participation in external programs, referrals from external service providers, and certifications of status, because the boundaries between these are often blurry.
10. These groups are more highly ranked than even working applicants. This is likely due to statutory requirements that preferences for working applicants must be extended to applicants with disabilities and elderly applicants, and that 75 percent of newly admitted families a year earn 30 percent or less of area median income.
11. The online supplement describes how cluster solutions differ for different numbers of clusters.
12. Six observations in this cluster are highly elaborate and do not fit this pattern. They may be considered misclassified.
13. Results from a multinomial logistic model predicting cluster membership are presented in the online supplement. They illustrate broadly similar patterns, although we exercise caution in interpreting them because our primary aim is to characterize unconditional descriptive patterns.
14. The online supplement describes patterns for other clusters, which are less pronounced than the patterns between the two extreme clusters.
15. As one legal scholar summarizing case law put it, "local preferences imposed by predominantly white communities in racially diverse areas virtually invite FHA effect claims" (Schwemm 2017:758).
16. In the case of disability, which can have subjective boundaries (O'Brien 2015), housing authorities often relied on existing administrative definitions, such as the individual receiving certain forms of assistance from the Social Security Administration.
17. Some jurisdictions have made it illegal for landlords to deny tenants because they hold vouchers, but these laws are hard to enforce, and landlords often instead screen more heavily on factors such as whether a tenant's behavior fits racialized stereotypes (Rosen et al. 2021).

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