

TH10.50.03 Housing Policy at the Local Level: the Role of Local Decisions and Decision-Makers

A Tale of Two Localities: Analyzing Rental Assistance Constraints in Alexandria and Arlington, Virginia through Path Dependence

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Over the past few decades, the theory of path dependence has been applied in economics, political science, and public policy. While path dependence has been discussed in housing studies, it has rarely, if ever, been utilized in national, state, and local U.S. housing policy. This paper analyzes local U.S. housing policy through applying path dependence. Specifically, this paper will address how similar localities with the same state and federal laws adopt significantly different local rental assistance policies under the path dependence framework. Our case study focuses on two similar, adjacent Virginia suburbs in the Washington, DC metropolitan area that developed different rental assistance policies specifically related to public housing and housing vouchers. Both Alexandria City and Arlington County, Virginia developed federal workforce housing during World War II. Alexandria City established a local housing authority in 1939 and converted much of this federal wartime housing into public housing that has continued its service until today, despite significant federal cutbacks over time. In contrast, Arlington County has never established a local housing authority, although it was considered by the County Board in the 1940s and 1950s and a proposal was on the local ballot in 1958, 1982, 2008, and 2013. However, both municipalities have established housing voucher programs. This paper will utilize comparative path analysis and content analysis of federal and local archival records as methods. We argue that path dependent analysis can explain the differences in rental assistance adoption, particularly as it relates to public housing and housing vouchers, and the different constraints faced by each municipality. This paper will demonstrate that path dependent analysis can serve as a valuable theoretical framework to better understand the evolution of local U.S. housing policies.

Affordable for Who? New York City's Affordable Housing Plan Under Mayor De Blasio and the Limits of Local Initiative in Addressing Shelter Poverty

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New York City is more than two years into Mayor De Blasio's ambitious housing plan to build and preserve 200,000 affordable housing units over 10 years. Despite its accomplishments, advocates have criticized the plan for failing to provide housing that is affordable to most residents of low-income neighborhoods, and, perversely, for aggravating the affordable housing crisis by fostering gentrification. In addition, some local communities and their political leaders have objected to zoning changes that would yield affordable housing because they would also increase building height and density. This paper will provide an overview of the De Blasio plan and its accomplishments to date, placing it in the context of the city's previous housing programs and the city's current housing market dynamics. It argues that the shortcomings of the plan in delivering housing affordable to low-income households highlight fundamental limitations in the ability of state and local governments to address the housing needs of low-income residents.

Federal Initiative to End Homelessness in the Era of Devolution: Homeless-exclusionary Local Preference Systems in the Housing Choice Voucher Program

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Devolution of authority is theoretically legitimized as a way to promote public engagement in policy-making process. Locally-fragmented administration of the HCV program, however, creates much uncertainty, if not a coordination problem, for the federal initiative to end homelessness. This paper examines challenges facing the federal initiative to end homelessness in the era of devolution by documenting how increased discretionary power by local public housing authorities unintentionally results in the entrenchment of homeless-exclusionary preference systems in the HCV program. Using the HCV administrative plans of local PHAs in Michigan, I document two dominant forms of a local preference system: non-preference system that promotes the selective attrition of the homeless from regular purging and local preference system with a heavily-weighted residency preference that disadvantages the homeless applicants whose residential history is extremely volatile. Afterward, using a political-economic perspective on organizational behaviors, I examine how homeless-exclusionary local preference systems have become entrenched in the HCV program among local PHAs in the metropolitan area where the homeless are concentrated. I reveal that underfunding for the HCV program administration and a set of additional federal regulations on local preferences prevents even highly-motivated PHAs from establishing the homeless preference. This general tendency of organizational inertia interacts with action/inaction of two key actors, a city government and non-profits, in the local decision making for establishing tenant selection preference, which results in selective assertion of the residency preference. This paper suggests that limited capacity of local PHAs prevents them to effectively address the regional problem of homelessness and the critical necessity of regional forms of collaboration.