Institute of Transportation Studies
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Sustainable Transportation and Just Affordable Housing

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Issue

California's intense affordable housing crisis has highlighted the fundamental linkage between land use, transportation, climate policy, and equity. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the main contributor to climate change, is a priority policy goal for the state of California, and cutting vehicle miles traveled (VMT) is a key mechanism for achieving this goal. In order to equitably achieve this reduction, it is critical that affordable housing options be situated in areas that facilitate less driving, through reliable access to public transit, walkability, and proximity to employment. These elements, among others, can combine to create more sustainable communities.

In the face of rising housing prices, publicly subsidized affordable housing is crucial for low-income and other vulnerable Californians. This study analyzed geographic transportation, environmental, and racial and economic equity indicators alongside the spatial distributions of two affordable housing programs in 2012 and their change from 2012 to 2019:

- Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV), also known as "Section 8": the nation's major tenant-based rental support program, a portable voucher designed to cover the gap between 30% of a household's income and the cost of rent in a market unit.
- Low-income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC): the nation's largest project-based affordable housing development program, a tax credit used to subsidize income-restricted, lower-rent housing units.

Research Findings

- The locations of HCV units and especially how they have changed from 2012 to 2019 demonstrate promising trends for reducing VMT and increasing walkability and transit accessibility. Almost three-fifths (58%) of their net change occurred in the lowest quintile census tracts for household VMT in California (See Figure 1).
- LIHTC unit locations are somewhat more sustainable than the state overall, with slightly lower-skewing VMT and better walkability, but with low transit accessibility. In 2012, LIHTC units were relatively equally distributed by household VMT, though only 13% fell in the state's highest quintile. From 2012 to 2019, there was no significant progress towards lower-VMT tracts (See Figure 1).
- Although these findings indicate some environmental and social gains, HCV units still tend to be located in areas with higher rates of air pollution and vehicle collisions.
- HCV and LIHTC units are concentrated in disproportionately poor neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color, with higher unemployment rates and worse access to economic opportunities. Almost 80% of net new HCV units from 2012 to 2019 and 45% of 2012 LIHTC family units were in the poorest quintile of California tracts (See Figure 2). HCV and LIHTC units tend to be in denser, more central areas, with net losses in HCV units in areas adjacent to them.
- HCV units became increasingly concentrated in areas with lower rent, as the value of the voucher decreased relative to the actual market rent in much of the state.

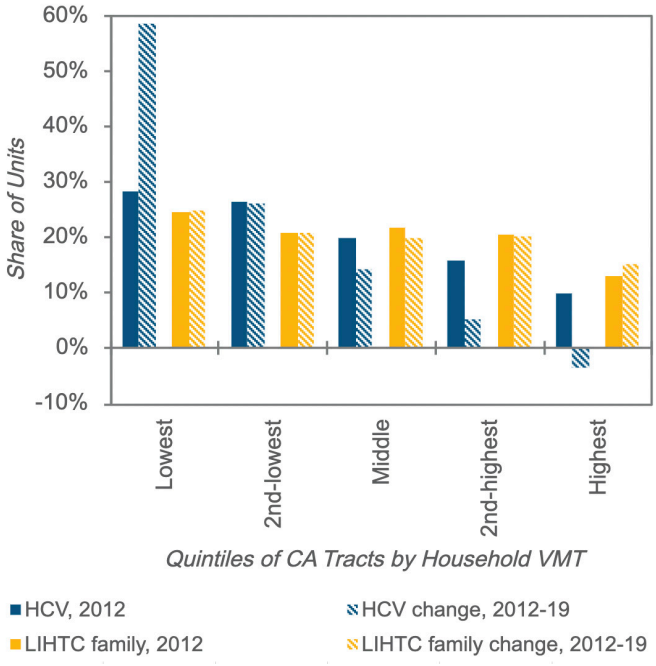

Figure 1. Subsidized Housing Units by Household VMT

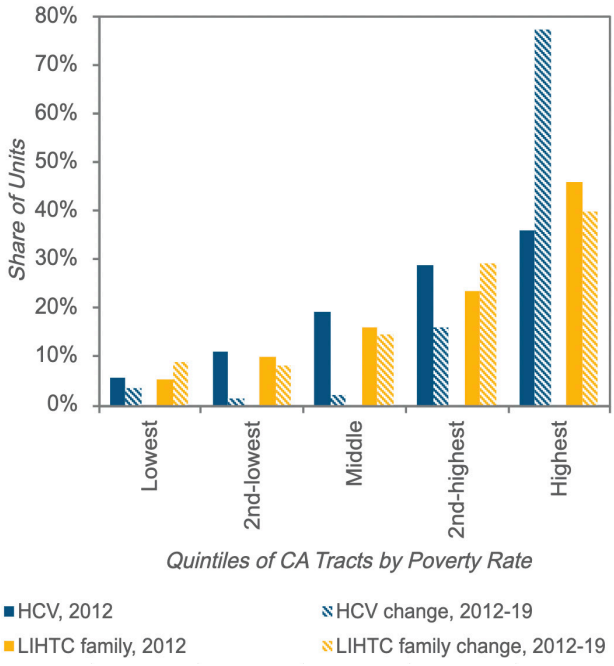

Figure 2. Subsidized Housing Units by Neighborhood Poverty

Conclusion

- These findings reveal an inherent structural dilemma — whether the HCV and LIHTC programs are able to simultaneously achieve climate and equity goals. Shifting the location of affordable housing to more sustainable and lower-VMT neighborhoods can decrease access to employment opportunities, exacerbate racial segregation, and increase health risks. This creates a major challenge for the state and local governments as they struggle to address climate change and promote racial and economic equity. As California continues to experience a growing housing crisis and the demand for affordable housing continues to rise, resolving this dilemma will be essential.
- Programmatic changes, such as better collaboration between agencies, housing search aid, landlord engagement, short-term financial assistance, and improvements to the way voucher amounts are set can all help agencies work towards both sustainable transportation and just affordable housing.
- Programmatic changes alone are not sufficient. Real change requires addressing the contradictions and systemic inequalities deeply embedded in the spatial urban structure. Tackling such underlying structural economic, social, and political barriers is daunting but must be done to meet equitable sustainability and housing goals.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from "The Spatial Dilemma of Sustainable Transportation and Just Affordable Housing" research project by the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies and UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge. The full reports can be found at https://www.its.ucla.edu/project/the-spatial-dilemma-of-sustainable-transportation-and-just-affordable-housing/.

Figure Data Sources: escholarship.org/uc/item/3mn6q0zm, data.census.gov, huduser.gov/portal/datasets/assthsg.html, lihtc.huduser.gov

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