

STUDY SERIES
(*Survey Methodology* #2005-01)

**Report on Cognitive Testing of the Housing
Subsidy Questions in the
American Housing Survey**

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Report Issued: February 10, 2005

Disclaimer: This report is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion of work in progress. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At a time when housing subsidy programs are changing, the U.S. Census Bureau must ensure that new words and concepts do not hinder its ability to accurately identify and describe low-income housing program participation for its customer, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). As directed by HUD, the Statistical Research Division (SRD) conducted cognitive research on proposed revisions of the housing subsidy question series in the American Housing Survey (AHS) under the Census Bureau's generic clearance for questionnaire pretesting research (OMB number 0607-0725). Qualitative research techniques included an expert appraisal of the survey questions and cognitive interviews with housing program participants.¹

The purpose of the research was to test the performance of changes to the AHS housing subsidy question series as proposed by ORC Macro (ORCM) in its recent work for HUD². The ORCM work had focused on identifying sources of false positive reports of housing subsidy status: both erroneous inclusions and misreporting of type of housing subsidy. Because new words, concepts and questions were suggested in the ORCM research recommendations, SRD needed to test whether the proposed changes reduced problems identified by ORCM and still met question objectives. To accomplish this, SRD administered the entire housing subsidy question sequence, including the AHS rent control question. By testing the whole series, it was also possible to identify the effect neighboring questions might be having on response processes (i.e. question context effects).

Results showed that some of the revised questions did indeed perform better than the current AHS questions, while others continued to present cognitive problems for respondents. In addition, difficulties arose from the use of unfamiliar terms (e.g., vouchers, housing authority, rent control, rent stabilization) and new terms (e.g., landlord). In many cases, respondents' interpretations of such terms were inventive but ultimately wrong and produced response errors. In other cases, response accuracy was unaffected. This work suggests that the final specifications for the subsidy questions will benefit from the use of clearer terms, explicitly expressed definitions where ambiguous terms are unavoidable, and modified question skip logic to avoid false positives.

The list below highlights the main findings:

1. **With a few exceptions, the revised housing subsidy question series outperformed the current series.** The new questions tapped different aspects of housing support and in theory, should help analysts better classify respondents among program types. The failure of some questions (largely explained by vague or unknown terms), however, indicates that self-identification of subsidy type will remain difficult for participants in some programs.
2. **Persons in traditional Section 8 programs use imprecise language to identify their program type.** Multiple terms (certificate, voucher, subsidy, Section 8, etc.) compete for the same concept. Also, concepts are used differently between types of program participants, between regions and among people with varying tenure in the programs. Sometimes a particular term is used loosely, other times narrowly. In one instance, one term may refer to vastly different programs; in another, it may be exclusively attached to one program.

¹ For a description of the expert appraisal methodology see Lessler and Forsyth, 1992. For an understanding of the cognitive interview methods, see Forsyth and Lessler, 1996.

² "Data Collection Techniques for Identifying the Housing Subsidy Status of Survey Respondents" issued March 31, 2004 to the Office of Policy Development and Research, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington, D.C.

3. **Respondents not participating in the two main federally funded housing programs** (public housing and housing choice vouchers) **provide inconsistent answers to whether the housing authority is their landlord (HCST12d/PROJ) and whether they were assigned or chose their unit (HCST12e/APPLY).** They appear less knowledgeable about specific details of their housing program. Generally, these respondents are certain they do not have vouchers. Their inconsistent answers to the public housing questions, however, may make it difficult to distinguish them from true public housing residents.
4. **Most tenant-based voucher (TBV) recipients answer accurately to key concepts that relate to their program** (recertification, subsidy, voucher, choice and portability) **and unreliably to items that do not** (housing authority, rent control). To improve accuracy it might be possible to 1) reorder the series to avoid asking questions with obvious answers or that do not apply, essentially controlling error through skips, or 2) automatically assign correct values in the interview or system for those items.
5. **Interpreting and answering a question as intended depended on whether the question included information clarifying ambiguous or unknown technical terms for respondents.**
 - a. *Recertification.* Though a long and clumsy question, its personal relevance to respondents helped them overcome its weaknesses. Respondents who were unsure of the term relied on concepts introduced by ORCM (reporting income, who lives with you, to determine rent) and responded quickly and accurately.
 - b. *Landlord.* “Landlord” was added by ORCM to overcome the difficulty some respondents had understanding the term “housing authority”. Including the word landlord worked best for public housing residents, but these people were most familiar with a housing authority anyway. People less familiar with a housing authority were inconsistent in how they related the landlord concept to it, which introduced response errors. (The errors by tenant-based voucher (TBV) recipients can be avoided by revising the question order as mentioned above.)
 - c. *Assigned or chose.* Whether respondents said they were assigned or chose where they lived was muddled by two main problems: 1) Respondents often wanted to express some freedom to choose, no matter how limited, even when they were ultimately assigned a unit, and 2) The question included the phrase “apartment or building”, inadvertently signaling two levels of choice. Respondents were very inconsistent in how they interpreted and addressed these levels. (In some cases, it is possible to deduce this error from responses to other questions in the series.)
 - d. *Rent Control, Rent Stabilization* Nearly all respondents had no basis to understand these terms. In straining to understand them, they fashioned their own meanings from neighboring questions. About 40 percent came to the erroneous conclusion their unit was rent controlled because there was a formal procedure to determine their rent. Another 40 percent concluded they just did not know. The remaining seven respondents deduced that rent control did not apply to them. In all but one case, coming to a conclusion was time consuming and effortful. Because such programs are rare and isolated, SRD recommends that the question be restricted to the five or so areas where it is known to exist (e.g., parts of CA, DC, NJ, NY, and MD). The effort and confusion imposed on the rest of the sampled households can be avoided.

6. **Generally, respondents in this pretest answered the subsidy question (AHS2) easily and accurately. They also demonstrated an interpretation of the question, however, if used by other participants could induce response errors.** The intent of AHS2 was to identify respondents who pay below market rent because of their program participation, but the question lacks a specific reference set. (Lower rent than what? Because of whom, what?) Many took exception to the phrase “pay a lower rent” when interpreted literally. Although none of these respondents responded incorrectly because of that, they did, however, describe situations where other people might err—if a person’s rent obligation was zero (no assets, no employment), if their rent had gone up because their income had increased, and so on. Finally, there seems to be a subtle shift in scope when comparing the specifications in the interviewer manual with the revised questions.
7. **Respondents were confident in their answers to the two voucher questions** (did they have a voucher, was the voucher portable). For PBV participants, this was misplaced—they often said they did not have a voucher because they did not associate that term with their subsidy program. Except for the PBV participants, respondents were accurate in saying whether or not they had a voucher. Those who did not have one used the following rule: if they did not know what a voucher was, they must not have one. These respondents were more confident in their answer when the voucher definition was repeated to them.

1 INTRODUCTION

Background

The American Housing Survey (AHS) is a survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau to serve the policy and program needs of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The survey provides a current and continuous description of residential housing and demographics by selecting a sample of housing units and studying them over time. Every type of non-institutional housing is included: apartments, single-family homes, mobile homes and so on. In addition to measuring housing type and structural characteristics, there are questions about household demographics including household composition, income, and housing costs, as well as subjective measures of neighborhood quality.

Questions to identify housing subsidy program participants have been embedded in HUD's larger and broader study of American housing for many years³. As housing policies and programs changed over time, so too did the terms and concepts used to describe them. The ability to collect accurate survey responses in part depends on how quickly and universally respondents adopt new terms, and once adopted, whether they are used and understood as intended.

Beyond changes brought about by new programs, words and their meanings evolve over time. Some terms acquire very specialized meanings (e.g., voucher), while others fall into disuse or devolve into vague, inclusive concepts. For example, in this research we see how the decline in rent control programs has affected many people's interpretation of "rent control". Rent control programs are now confined to a handful of places in the United States. In those areas we would expect that most people still interpret the rent control question as intended. Outside those places, however, people in this study seemed unfamiliar with the formal use of the term. To them, "rent control" meant *any* government behavior that could influence the rent a person might otherwise pay. They used a much broader interpretation than its specialized use in the AHS question. Thus, respondents erroneously included themselves as living in rent controlled units.

In this research both personal context (e.g., housing program participation) as well as question context (the influence on one question by questions preceding it) contributed to errors in different phases of the response process. In the remainder of this document, where such problems occurred (comprehension, retrieval, judgment or reporting stage) and what repairs might reduce them are discussed.

Objectives

The purpose of this project was to test revisions to the housing subsidy series that were recommended by ORCM in their recent work for HUD. The Census Bureau conducted this research to ensure that housing program changes and new terms associated with them would perform as intended in the revised questions. The Statistical Research Division (SRD), as directed by HUD through sponsoring divisions within the Census Bureau, sought to establish how well the ORCM question items would perform. Words and concepts not part of the original AHS series were introduced in the ORCM revisions. Before adopting the changes, it was important to understand any influence the changes might have on how respondents understood the question and to compare that with question intent. Finally, the rent control question was added to this test to understand how preceding subsidy questions might affect how respondents understood it.

³ See Appendix C for a functional comparison of current subsidy programs by type.

To ensure that we obtained sufficient coverage to fully test the questions, a variety of persons in a diversity of programs were interviewed. This is often difficult to achieve within the limited time and resources of a research budget. The personal involvement of outreach agencies in the Chicago, Detroit and metropolitan Washington, DC area interviews made it possible to reach our goals. It also furthered the quality and relevance of this work.

2 METHODS

2.1 INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

To better understand how the recommended question changes might function in the actual survey, they were administered exactly as worded. Respondents were instructed to use the concurrent think aloud method during their response process. With this method, to the extent possible, respondents were asked to talk through how they interpreted the question, used their understanding to retrieve information, judged the relevance of it, and chose what and how they would report their answers.

Throughout the administration of the question series, there was minimal interruption from the initial reading of a question through the response process. Unless otherwise noted in the protocol (Appendix A), concurrent probes were restricted to two objectives: 1) clarifying respondents' use of words or concepts in the question or terms they spontaneously mentioned, and 2) acknowledging and encouraging respondents' elucidation of non-verbal expressions and response behavior (laughter, frowning, long pauses, quick responses, etc.). In-depth retrospective probes were restricted to natural breaks in the series—after question 3 (housing authority ownership) and after question 7 (rent control) or where it was most important to capture the initial process that produced the response. The entire interview protocol is included in Appendix A, but where useful, specific references are included in the results section.

2.2 RESPONDENTS

During the months of July and August 2004, three SRD staff conducted a total of 27 cognitive interviews in Chicago, Detroit, and Metropolitan Washington (Virginia, the District of Columbia and Suburban Maryland). Respondents were recruited largely through public notices in the newspaper but also through local social service agencies and legal aid offices.

Respondent Demographics

The average household size among respondents was 1.9 persons with 10 households having at least one dependent child and eight having 2 or more dependents. Respondent age ranged from 25 to 83 years. The average age was about 48 years (Table 1). Of the respondents, two were male, nineteen were African American and eight were white. None were Hispanic. Educational attainment ranged from less than high school to a Master's Degree. Most respondents had little formal education beyond high school.

Table 1: Respondent Age Distribution

Age Group	<i>freq</i>
Under 30	2
30-39	4
40-49	9
50-59	9
60 or older	3
TOTAL	27

Respondent Tenure at Current Address and in a Program

About half of the respondents had been at their current address less than three years (Table 3), but the average time at their current address was about 6 years. As expected, overall time as program participants

averaged longer, about 10 years. Residential mobility among this group is fairly high given the recent closing of large housing projects (under Hope VI), newer programs that allow greater mobility (Tenant-based Vouchers), changes in household composition, and the people’s ongoing desire to secure better and safer housing. Although mobility enhanced some people’s awareness of other subsidized housing options, it sometimes raised concerns about how the program would affect them personally. For example, some longtime public housing residents were apprehensive about the security of funding for vouchers, dealing with landlords, and rent stability in privately owned properties.

**Table 3: Tenure at Current Address
By Type of Subsidy**

	Tenant Voucher	Project Voucher	Public Housing	LIHTC ⁴	Other	TOTAL
< 1 year	2	2	2	--	1	7
1-2 years	4	1	2	1	--	8
3-5 years	1	--	2	--	--	3
6-10 years	--	--	1	1	--	2
11+ years	1	2	2	1	1	7
TOTAL	8	5	9	3	2	27

2.3 SAMPLING HOUSING SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Respondents were selected according to their subsidy type. The resulting sample was distributed fairly evenly between regions and type of subsidy (Table 2). Although the intention was to recruit equal numbers by type of subsidy, some types were more common or accessible in certain jurisdictions. As well, respondents recruited for one program sometimes turned out to have another type of subsidy. A description of the selected housing support programs follows. To see key differences between these programs, refer to Appendix C: A Comparison of Housing Subsidy Programs by Type.

**Table 2: Number of Respondents Interviewed
By Place and Type of Subsidy**

PLACE	Tenant Voucher	Project Voucher	Public Housing	LIHTC	Other	TOTAL
Detroit	1	2	1	3	--	7
MD	3	--	2	--	--	5
DC	--	1	3	--	2	6
VA	1	1	--	--	--	2
Chicago	3	1	3	--	--	7
TOTAL	8	5	9	3	2	27

⁴ This column refers to respondents living in property enrolled by the property owner in the federal Low Income Housing Tax Credit program (LIHTC). In exchange for the property tax credit, the property owner sets aside a certain number of rental units for low-income households for a number of years.

Federally Funded Housing Choice Vouchers

There are seven Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) programs funded by HUD offered through local housing authorities: Conversion Vouchers (CVs), Family Unification Vouchers (FUVs), Homeownership Vouchers (HVs), Project Based Vouchers (PBVs), Tenant Based Vouchers (TBVs), Vouchers for People with Disabilities (VPDs), and Welfare-to-Work Vouchers (WWVs), (HUD, Housing Choice Vouchers, 2004a). Housing Choice Vouchers are for very low-income families. HUD notes that vouchers may be used to either lease or purchase safe, decent, and affordable privately owned rental housing. In this research, only renters were interviewed, but some respondents were aware of or were planning to use a voucher to purchase a home in the future.

Five of the seven types of vouchers (all but PBVs and HVs) share the two characteristics the AHS series asks about: the “voucher” label and the feature that makes them portable across program jurisdictions. Thus, there was no special effort to include all the different types in recruiting respondents. Neither are there special breakouts by type here. Throughout this report these five vouchers are referred to as Tenant-based Vouchers, because for each, rental choice, location and landlord interaction is largely tenant-driven.

Vouchers Assigned to a Property

Building from the ORCM research (which sampled PBV, TBV, public housing and LIHTC residents), people with Project-based Vouchers (PBVs) were sampled separately from other voucher recipients. Two characteristics of PBVs cause recipients to view their vouchers differently from other subsidized housing recipients: 1) PBVs are attached to a specific address and 2) they are not portable. Although the PHA may refer people (typically people on a waiting list for other vouchers) to a list of pre-qualified properties, the owners ultimately select the families who occupy the units.

PHAs refer families, who have already applied to a PHA for housing choice vouchers and are on the PHAs waiting list, to properties that have project-based voucher assistance when units become vacant. (HUD, Project Based Vouchers, 2004c)

Vouchers Assigned to a Person

The Tenant-based Vouchers (including all seven types of housing choice vouchers) require that people perform their own housing search, i.e. they need not work from a list of pre-qualified buildings and units.

“It is the responsibility of a family to find a unit that meets their needs. If the family finds a unit that meets the housing quality standards, the rent is reasonable, and the unit meets other program requirements, the PHA executes a contract with the property owner. This contract authorizes the PHA to make subsidy payments on behalf of the family. If the family moves out of the unit, the contract with the owner ends and the family can move with continued assistance to another unit.” (HUD, Tenant Based Vouchers, 2004e)

Unlike PBVs, tenant based vouchers are attached to the program participant not the property, and they may be used to move to other addresses—so long as the property meets the conditions such as cost and size noted on their voucher. Beyond local portability, these vouchers may also be used to move to other PHAs’ jurisdictions, in fact the recipients may move anywhere in the United States. HUD explains the difference between TBVs and PBVs this way:

“Under the tenant-based housing choice voucher program, the PHA issues an eligible family a voucher and the family selects a unit of its choice. If the family moves out of the unit, the contract with the owner ends and the family can move with continued assistance to another unit.

Under the project-based voucher program, a PHA enters into an assistance contract with the owner for specified units and for a specified term. The PHA refers families from its waiting list to the project owner to fill vacancies. Because the assistance is tied to the unit, a family who moves from the project-based unit does not have any right to continue housing assistance. However, they may be eligible for a tenant-based voucher when one becomes available.” (HUD, TBV 2004e.)

Although HUD uses the term *voucher* to refer to all of its housing choice vouchers, most program participants do not use *voucher* to refer to project based vouchers, i.e. those tied to a specific address. Most think of *voucher* exclusively in relation to tenant based vouchers.

Because only the PBVs are associated with a specific property address, this report refers to all non-project based vouchers as tenant-based vouchers. This research did not attempt to identify what type of voucher a person had other than whether it was project-based or person-based. Considering the personal situations volunteered by respondents, however, it is likely that some of them had Conversion Vouchers, Vouchers for People with Disabilities, and Welfare-to-Work Vouchers.

Low-income Persons Living in Properties Enrolled in the Housing Tax Credit Program

In an effort to identify sources of false positive reports of subsidy status among low-income respondents in the AHS, the ORCM study included persons living in properties enrolled in the federal Low-Income Housing Tax Property Credit⁵ (LIHTC) program. Under this program, with the owner as an enrollee in a federal property tax credit program, the occupant is not necessarily a Section 8, voucher or any other type of subsidy recipient. The tax status of a low-income property has no direct relationship to subsidy status for the respondent. There are many reasons, however, why an LIHTC resident might erroneously report receiving a subsidy.

Beyond simply misunderstanding the question or its intent, the application process may be too similar to the process by which subsidies are received. First, the same players may be involved in helping them find a home. A PHA may have actually referred them to an LIHTC address while waiting for a formal subsidy. Housing specialists from local social service agencies are often involved in these referrals as well. Second, the owners, in an effort to qualify for their LIHTC, often administer paperwork with questions similar to the PHA or other agencies. Some respondents in this research were clearly befuddled by the AHS questions, but they are just as unclear about details of their residency. Third, these LIHTC properties have a smorgasbord of low income housing tenants, some of whom move from one subsidy program status to another while occupying the same unit. All of these possibilities make LIHTCs a good source of false positive reports of subsidy status.

⁵ As an incentive to provide more low-income housing, the low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC) program provides an indirect federal subsidy to private developers and investors to finance the construction and rehabilitation of low-income affordable rental housing. To receive the tax credit, owners have to restrict the rent on units for low-income tenants for 30 years. Beyond that period, the owner may rent to whomever and however they choose. Public housing authorities administer the LIHTC program according to the general guidelines set by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and require owners to certify annually that they are renting units to qualified low-income tenants. There are complex administrative rules, regulations and paperwork associated with enrollment such as maintaining the required number of income-eligible tenants, filing and maintaining the specific documents and records, preparing accounting documentation related to a carryover allocation, cost certifications and annual compliance forms.

This list demonstrates the diversity of people who may occupy units in an LIHTC property.

- PBV recipients: An LIHTC property may have some (or all) of their units certified for project-based voucher occupancy. For this reason, people with PBVs may reside in them.
- TBV recipients: People with TBVs may also live in LIHTC properties because they may choose to do so, but they can live anywhere. It is not clear whether they would or would not occupy a pre-certified unit within that property.
- People under any number of state, local or private housing support programs.
- People who are eligible but do not participate in any voucher program. People who meet the criteria in terms of income, household composition, disability and so on do not necessarily participate in any program. Affordability may attract them to these units.
- People who do not meet the eligibility factors for a federal housing voucher but meet the income threshold for the owner to receive the LIHTC tax credit. The LIHTC program and the voucher programs have different income criteria.
- Non low-income persons: The LIHTC program simply requires that the owner set aside a percentage, not all, of their units for low-income people. As such, people not defined as low-income under the tax credit program may also live in LIHTC properties.

Other Sources of Error

It was evident in this and the ORCM work that some voucher recipients were using multiple and different terms to label their programs—making it difficult to properly identify them in the reported AHS data (creating false positives, etc.) That said, ORCM’s wording improvements in the series’ two screener questions should reduce erroneous inclusions of non-program participants. Respondents participating in privately funded programs or other federal, state-, or local- housing programs are more likely to have difficulty with the questions about the housing authority’s role and their perception of choice than with the voucher questions. With the given series, it is not possible to distinguish among them; in fact it is not the intention of the series to do so. Since these respondents often have a limited understanding of their own program’s features, and typically less of the ones we do ask about, they are making response errors that would make them appear to be public housing residents (e.g., “yes” to the question about the housing authority being their landlord.)

Externally validating subsidy status is itself difficult. Some respondents’ answers in this work were compared with publicly available information about their property address. Of the respondents in this research, one (R14) was a Tenant-based Voucher recipient who chose to live in a project-based property that also appeared on the LIHTC database (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2004b). Two others (R23 and R24) were recruited through a housing specialist as living in public housing, but in fact lived in an LIHTC property. Their apartment complex also appeared on a list of project-based voucher properties. In their interviews, these two respondents did not mention the PHA as being any part of their housing search. They, in fact, indicated that they applied directly to their leasing office. Their survey responses (Appendix B, Table B4) were indistinguishable from what a public housing resident might have reported. It is probably not possible to construct a question series that can overcome response errors resulting from an inadequate understanding of the low-income or subsidized housing itself. That said, the series is improved over previous versions.

Public Housing

Public Housing is easier to define than the other programs and seemingly easier and more accurately reported. Public housing is the only property actually owned by a housing authority for the purpose of renting to very low-income families, the elderly and persons with disabilities. The properties that

participants in all other programs live in are *privately* owned. The PHA may own single-family homes, townhouses, condos, mobile homes, etc., in addition to high-rise apartment projects. The application process is typically done directly at or through the housing authority. Thus, respondents should have the most direct and reliable understanding of the housing authority's role in their living situation. (HUD, Public Housing, 2004d.)

3 RESULTS

In this section, we present the results of this research in the order the questions were administered in the cognitive interviews. For each question, this report describes the measurement goal of the question (question intent), the question designed to meet that intent, and an expert appraisal of that design (Lessler and Forsyth, 1992). Cognitive interview results follow and describe respondents’ behavior, their actual responses and the themes emerging from them. Individual respondent’s answers by question are included in Appendix B.

Under each question below we include a table of the original AHS question, the question recommended by ORCM, and the question tested by SRD. Note that wording differences between the ORCM recommendation and the SRD test were arrived at in conference with HUD and the Housing and Household Economics Division and Demographic Surveys Division at the Census Bureau. To see the entire question series tested at a glance, refer to Appendix D. Tables of actual responses are included in Appendix B: Item Responses by Type of Subsidy.

3.1 RECERTIFICATION (AHS1)

Question Intent

The intent of the first two questions in the housing subsidy series is to identify all sampled households that participate in a formal housing support program. In nearly all programs, participants are required to periodically disclose extensive personal information to re-establish eligibility and to determine their future subsidy amount (i.e. their rent). In AHS1, respondents are essentially asked about a behavior: must they do certain things. In AHS2, they are asked whether they are the recipients of someone else’s action, i.e. whether they pay a rent that is subsidized.

Question Design

From the current survey question to the version tested by SRD, the purpose and nature of the periodic reporting requirements was sharpened. “Need to answer” was upgraded to “required to complete”. “Questions about your income” became “recertification by reporting income AND who lives with you to determine the amount of rent you pay.” The only modification from the ORCM version was to clarify that both conditions be met: reporting income AND who lives with you.

Figure 1: Recertification Question History

	AHS Original	ORCM Recommended Revision	SRD Test
AHS 1 HCST12a (RENEW)	1. As part of your rental agreement, do you need to answer questions about your income whenever your lease is up for renewal? (Y/N)	1. Each year, as part of your rental agreement, is your household required to complete recertification by reporting income or who lives with you to determine the amount of rent you pay? (Y/N)	1. Each year, as part of your rental agreement, is your household required to complete recertification by reporting income AND who lives with you to determine the amount of rent you pay? (Y/N/DK)
	<i>22 words</i>	<i>31 words</i>	<i>31 words</i>

Appraisal

As designed, AHS1 is too long and cumbersome to be read consistently well by interviewers in a telephone interview. The current AHS question uses 22 words, the revised question, 31 words and 48 syllables. Well-timed pauses and inflection will influence respondents' abilities to grasp the question on its first reading. Long questions often need to be repeated for respondents who do not grasp them, adding to the administration time of a question. AHS1 is a long question because the subject is complex. It uses vague terms (rental agreement), undefined technical terms (recertification), and sets multiple conditions to warrant a simple response (yes/no).

Results, AHS1 (Recertification)

Response Behavior

Because of the linguistic difficulty of this item, this question should have failed but it did not. Most respondents answered this question with certainty. Those who hesitated only did so to express other features of recertification. All 27 respondents answered the question quickly and correctly in spite of its complex syntax. Respondents' difficult financial circumstances make them keenly aware of the conditions of program eligibility and factors in rent determination. This seems to override any inherent weaknesses in question design for program participants.

Recertification is the Key Term for Some Respondents

Respondents answered this question so quickly and confidently that without follow-up, it would have been impossible to understand why the question performed well. They seemed to get the main thrust by instinct. It became clear, however, that they arrived at their answers via different paths. The unintentional flexibility in interpreting this question seemed to serve the question's goal.

To understand how respondents interpreted this question, each was asked to paraphrase it immediately after their initial response. Most of these respondents had little education beyond high school. As is typical with less educated groups, paraphrasing was a difficult task. Most respondents simply repeated parts of the survey question rather than do classic paraphrasing. Overall, asking respondents to paraphrase was useful in that it disclosed which aspects of the question respondents found most important as well as what mediated their understanding of the question.

During the paraphrasing of this question, respondents repeated the income (or job status) requirement most often (9 times) and usually mentioned it first. Seven people specifically mentioned the word recertification (or an equivalent concept) to the exclusion of other ideas. Six people brought up 'who lives there' or household size. These people had dependents living with them (or had in the past), and four of them brought up this factor before mentioning income. Three respondents were unable to paraphrase the question at all.

The word recertification was especially salient to people for whom it had a specific meaning. They often used it or an equivalent concept (re-qualify, re-determination, etc.) exclusively when they paraphrased the question. For example, a tenant-based voucher recipient in Chicago (R13) said, "It's about how often you have to recertify". A public housing resident (R20) in Detroit said it meant, "Why do you recertify every year?" A Maryland tenant-based voucher recipient (R11) said, "You have to do the recertification process." Furthermore, their emphasis on the word recertification hinted that these people largely ignored the remainder of the question in formulating their initial response.

Program Requirements More Relevant to Others

Respondents who found the term recertification strange or less important were more likely to ride out the entire question. They often excluded the term when paraphrasing, instead citing eligibility factors or their

actual rent outcome. (Rent was initially mentioned by five people during the concurrent think aloud and most others during the retrospective probing later in the interview). For example, to a public housing resident in DC (R18) the question meant, “(It) may be how much I am paying rent.” To a public housing resident in Chicago (R23) it meant, “I guess about how much rent do I pay?” It is also possible that the factors took precedence only because they are stated last in the question, thus were more easily recalled. Whether or not the omission of recertification was deliberate, the words respondents chose to include in their recasting of the question signified to some degree what was most salient to them, what fueled their quick and accurate response.

Three respondents completely missed the main message in paraphrasing and mentioned program enforcement issues. For example, a tenant-based voucher recipient in Virginia (R13) said, “I think you’re ... checking on my honesty.” Another, a low-income housing resident in Michigan (R24) said, “It doesn’t get at what happens, just what people are supposed to do.”

Summary

Overall, respondents paraphrased imprecisely, incompletely, and sometimes wrongly. Even so, their words deftly illustrated how they understood the ultimate intent of the question and what was important to them. In essence, the term recertification is sufficient stimulus for some to say ‘yes’ while for others, the nature of the requirements needs to be expressed. For that reason, both the term and the requirements should be retained in the question. Evaluating initial interpretations of this question showed that mentioning income, who lives with them and the effect on rent all shared equal importance. Later analysis indicated that other features of recertification were left out of this question. Such features, however, may not be as critical to respondents for addressing question intent and generating an accurate response by program participants. They may, on the other hand, provide the extra emphasis needed to ensure non-program participants respond correctly and are screened out of the series.

3.2 SUBSIDY – paying a lower rent (AHS2)

Question Intent

Along with the first question, the purpose of this question is to isolate housing subsidy program participants from non-participants. It is a natural follow-up to the first item. If respondents said yes to recertification, they have confirmed that they submit to a process that affects their rent. The first question and their answer to it, however, do not establish what direction that effect might take. AHS2, on the other hand, implies the rent is lower *because* they receive a subsidy.

If a respondent answers “no” to AHS1 and AHS2, he/she skips out of the series to the rent control question (AHS7).

Question Design

There are subtle differences in the implied purpose of the three versions of AHS2 that may need to be addressed if unintentional. The specification in the interviewer manual for the original AHS question (see page D16-9) seems to cast a broader net than either of the revisions. It says the rent may be lower because the government is “paying part of the cost of the unit”, unusually ambiguous wording but subsequently clarified. The manual says this means that the government may be paying part of the construction, building, mortgage, or operating expenses. Although this information is not apparent in any of the three questions (as they would be read to respondents), the two revisions both step away from the broad intent implied in the manual.

Figure 2: Subsidy Question History

	AHS Original	ORCM Recommended Revision	SRD Test
AHS2 HCST12c (SUBRNT)	3. Do you pay a lower rent because the government is paying part of the cost of the unit? (Y/N/DK)	2. Is your rent amount lower because you are in either a Federal, State, or local government-housing program? (Y/N)	2. Does your household pay a lower rent because it receives a rental subsidy? (Y/N/DK)
	<i>18 words</i>	<i>17 words</i>	<i>13 words</i>

Appraisal

The original question asks if the rent is lower without saying how that may be accomplished. Compared to its revisions, it is less restrictive thus, more program participants might answer *yes* to it. In the broadest interpretation, federal voucher or other subsidy program recipients, public housing residents, people using vouchers to purchase homes and residents in LIHTC properties could each answer ‘yes’ under the original wording. The housing authority, either through a direct subsidy or by indirectly underwriting the cost and maintenance of the unit, may provide financial support for the occupant’s residency.

The revised questions by ORCM and SRD are more narrowly written. The ORCM question personalizes it by asking if the rent is lower because “YOU are in a ... housing-program”. This narrows the scope to people who are receiving a benefit through a housing program, without saying what that benefit is. The SRD question narrows the question further by directing attention at the benefit, i.e. asking if the rent is lower “because (YOUR HOUSEHOLD) receives a rental subsidy”.

Results, AHS2 (Rental Subsidy)

Response Behavior

Respondents generally came about their answers quickly. Where they hesitated, it was to quibble over the relationship between their rent and the “subsidy”.

Taking Issue with Causation

Some respondents objected to this question’s implied causal relationship between their subsidy and a lower rent. Several reasons arose. A popular one was expressed by a public housing resident in Chicago.

(R21): “I pay (more) because it’s basically because of what you make.”

By this she meant that if she earned more, she would pay more (not less). The rent was figured according to her income, so her income was not always “lower”. Income varied throughout the year according to opportunity and ability to work. The respondent used an interpretation that was quite literal, not uncommon in these interviews.

In addition, other respondents felt that if someone were paying no rent, they should not answer yes here. For example, a public housing resident said:

(R17) “Um, no. Right now I’m not paying any rent because I don’t have an income, so no, I would say no.”

Problematic Words

Others took exception to the word “receive”. For example, a TBV recipient (R8) said that she did not actually receive a subsidy because the funds were issued directly to the landlord under contract with the housing authority. She also indicated that the term “portion” was more common than “subsidy”, referring to the amount she paid as ‘her portion’ and what the government pays as ‘their portion.’

A PBV (R4) and two LIHTC respondents (R23 and R24) in Detroit each mentioned the concept of “ceiling rent”. If someone was paying ceiling rent, they felt that the person received no subsidy at all. This illustrates a failure by respondents to perceive the difference between market rent and what they paid as a subsidized rent. Also, a respondent in a rent-controlled unit in the District of Columbia (R27) keenly noted that if you had a subsidy, you might actually pay more than you would for a rent-controlled unit.

Summary

Respondents interpreted the SRD test question fairly narrowly. Changes from the original AHS question had no apparent effect on how respondents used the question, i.e. chiefly to express a program benefit. Concepts such as “lower rent” which had been maintained through the versions were actually more problematic. Ultimately, most respondents answered accurately. In the larger survey, however, with dozens of interviewers and a diversity of programs with local terms, this question interpretation may be less reliable and may need to be revisited. The salience, relevance and interpretation of key concepts such as participation (“housing-program”), benefit (subsidy), the provider (some government), and the effect (lower rent) is likely to vary across the diverse population of low-income renters.

3.3 HOUSING AUTHORITY AS LANDLORD (AHS3)

Question Intent

The purpose of this question is to identify whether the sampled household lives in public housing, i.e. property “owned by any local or state agency” (see interviewer manual). The interviewer manual also mentions that the housing authority “may receive subsidies from the Federal or State Government, but the local agency owns the property.” The main thrust of this question is to have respondents identify whether they live in publicly as opposed to privately owned subsidized housing. By definition, ownership is the key factor in determining this. Thus, only public housing residents should say yes here, all others should answer no.

Question Design

SRD tested the ORCM revision, which shifted emphasis away from building ownership to the relationship respondents have with the owners (i.e. their landlord function). The ORCM argument was this: although public housing residents can sometimes identify the public housing authority (PHA) as their property owner, ownership is not a salient feature of their relationship with the PHA. ORCM felt it would be more productive to capitalize on their routine interactions with the PHA through onsite managers, i.e. the PHAs local function. From their work, ORCM felt that identifying with the PHAs by function rather than owners seemed more natural and less confusing to respondents. Thus, building ownership was dropped from the question, and the landlord concept was added to embody those interactions with the PHAs.

Figure 3: Housing Authority Question History

	AHS Original	ORCM Recommended Revision	SRD Test
AHS3	4. Is the building owned by a public housing authority? (Y/N/DK)	3. Is the housing authority your landlord? (Y/N)	3. Is the housing authority your landlord? (Y/N/DK)
HCST12d (PROJ)			

Appraisal

The introduction of the word landlord was intentional; it was to redirect attention away from ownership to function. The issue of the undefined term housing authority, however, was never directly addressed in the revision of the question. When confronted with unclear concepts, respondents often use earlier questions and neighboring terms within a question to interpret them. An unknown term in the presence of a more familiar and tenable concept, such as landlord, could cause respondents to reverse the association between the two, alter the meaning of the question, and lead to response error.

Results, AHS3 (Housing Authority)

Response Behavior

Whether they answered the question readily or with hesitation, accurately or not, respondents' answers were often accompanied by qualifying information or justifications. The source of confusion or need for clarification was related to the word *landlord*. Respondents who misinterpreted the question's intent often did so based on their personal definition of landlord, a term they expressed more confidence in than *housing authority*. Finally, this question essentially tested respondents' knowledge of the meaning of housing authority. As is typical with knowledge questions, respondents unfamiliar with the term often expressed mild embarrassment, nervous laughter, or defensiveness at their ignorance.

In addition to their initial, volunteered explanations, respondents were specifically probed on their use of housing authority and landlord in the context of this question. About a quarter of the respondents changed their initial answers either during their spontaneous elaborations or when specifically probed afterward. This suggests they were relying heavily on context to assign meaning, which was often inaccurate.

The Problem with "Landlord"

The question asks, "Is the housing authority your landlord?" Many respondents, particularly non-public housing residents less familiar with the term housing authority, essentially reversed the order of the question in their minds to read: "Is your landlord the housing authority?" This brought the term they knew to the fore, landlord, and formed an entirely different judgment task for them. They began by enumerating what their landlord does, then deduced that because the person who does that is not called a housing authority, that their landlord was not the housing authority. They are other things, but not a housing authority.

Interestingly, respondents often associated the landlord with who owns the property, especially non-public housing residents. Their response began with *no* and followed by saying who owned the property by name.

In response to the survey question, a project-based voucher recipient in Virginia (R6) said:

“No, your landlord is the person who either owns the home or property that you live in. Brookside is my landlord.”

A tenant-based voucher recipient in Chicago (R9) said:

“No, and I’m thinking (name) is my landlord. She owns the apartment, this is her building.”

Tenant-based voucher recipients took the most indirect route to their answers. They were very deliberative in the judgment and reporting stages of the response process. Perhaps because they associated their benefit more directly with the housing authority and HUD, they stretched for ways to apply this question to their situation.

A tenant-based voucher recipient in Chicago (R7) said:

“I don’t think so. I have a landlord in my building but I guess well, if they pay a portion of my rent they could be my landlord. They’re helping me um, you know pay rent... Yeah, I guess so.” After expressing all three options with uncertainty, she was pressed to choose a response as would happen in a telephone interview, and said, “Kinda, yeah.”

Another Chicago tenant-based voucher recipient (R8) had a similar understanding:

[Pause] “I have two landlords, more or less. Um, the housing authority because they pay a portion of the rent and then, um the person who rents the place to me.”

These respondents felt that a landlord was anyone who participated in the rental agreement. Here the HA’s financial support made them a contract party.

Ownership is Clear Even if “Housing Authority” is Not

Generally, non-public housing residents knew their property was privately owned. Often unsure of what housing authority meant, they would eventually respond correctly with ‘no’. Lingering doubts appeared more related to uncertainty about the term than with the response itself. This suggests respondents placed a high value on response accuracy in these interviews. Finally, some respondents viewed any role by HUD as meaning the property was owned by a housing authority. Two LIHTC property residents from Detroit exhibited this interpretation.

(R23) “Yeah, I would say so since they make the stipulations for living here. They set up the rules and things, so yeah, I would think they would, I mean indirectly. I would have to follow the chain of command to go through the leasing office and if I don’t get any results then I go to HUD.”

(R24) “Well, we really don’t know, that’s a good question... We hear that HUD and the government own this. HUD was supposed to show up at a meeting but never showed up.” When asked who her landlord was, she responded with her onsite property manager’s name.

Although a few public housing residents blurred the line between their housing authority and HUD, most knew or spoke of them as separate entities and answered confidently and correctly. Some would recite the street address for the main HA office as proof that they knew it was organizationally different from managers at their property address. Some substituted the name of their housing authority in their answer, perhaps looking for assurance on making them equivalent terms. For example, one Maryland respondent (R26) answered:

“Uh, yes, the housing... Montgomery County Housing Commission is.”
When asked about her pause, she confirmed: “When you said the housing authority I didn’t know if you were talking about HUD or the county.”

Two public housing respondents erroneously answered no to this question, but for different reasons. By defining a landlord as to whom she writes her check, a Chicago respondent insisted that her complex was the landlord. A Maryland respondent was completely unfamiliar with the term housing authority because her son-in-law had done most of the paperwork for her admission to a senior housing complex. She answered, “I don’t think so” then, in contradiction, adding, “it’s connected somehow.”

Summary

Public housing respondents have the fewest problems understanding this question possibly because it is with these people that the housing authority has a special meaning. Most other respondents, because they do not have a good understanding of this term, have difficulty with this question. Although most eventually respond correctly (no), it is an effortful construction and confusing experience.

When asked ‘Who is your landlord?’ respondents often identified one by name: the property manager, to whom they wrote their check, or the owner listed on their lease. At times this was useful in identifying a misclassification of the subsidy type. As ORCM expected, respondents also described landlords by their function: where they sent their check, to whom they report problems or request maintenance, or where they renew their lease.

The revised question did not serve all respondents well, however. For example, tenant-based voucher recipients often answered incorrectly. Using a different question order, it would be possible to route these respondents past this question (see recommendations for AHS5 & AHS6) and not give them an opportunity to answer incorrectly. Making use of respondents’ knowledge about the public or private ownership of their building, as opposed to their (inadequate) understanding and use of the term housing authority and landlord may prove more accurate for them.

3.4 ASSIGNED OR CHOSE ADDRESS (AHS4)

Question Intent

The purpose of this item is to help derive the type of subsidy a respondent may have by identifying how he/she occupied the unit. As the original question implies, it cannot simply be resolved by whether or not a person was assigned to a particular address. (We assume that ‘address’ in the original question means the sampled household address. In most cases this would be an apartment unit, but it could also be a whole building in the form of a townhouse, detached home, mobile home, etc.) It is the process that brings a recipient to a particular address that varies by subsidy status, and this may be best reflected in the original AHS question (Figure 4).

Question Design

The broader idea of how the respondent came to live in the unit (unit is implied) is not retained in the revised questions. In the original AHS question, the respondent may say they either got there by being assigned to their unit by an agency (e.g. a PHA) or by applying to the management of a privately owned property. The ORCM question asks only if the housing authority assigned them to their place (apartment or building). The SRD question focuses only on the choice aspect of occupying the unit and omits the housing authority term entirely. The response alternatives of the different versions mirror these changes.

There were several reasons why the term housing authority was not used in the tested question: 1) Using the term in this question would presume it was understood correctly in the previous one. Non-public housing residents had demonstrated difficulty with this term in the past, so avoiding it here should have improved overall question comprehension; 2) Using the term was unnecessary at this point because it was already possible to identify the public housing residents. Only they should have responded yes to the previous three questions.

Figure 4: Assigned or Chose Address Question History

	AHS Original	ORCM Recommended Revision	SRD Test
AHS4	5. How did you come to live here? Did you apply to management here, or did an agency, such as the public housing authority, assign this address to you? (1) Applied (2) Assigned to address	4. Did a housing authority assign this apartment or building to your household? (1) Assigned to a specific apartment or building. (2) Not assigned.	4. Was your household assigned to this specific apartment or building, or were you allowed to choose it yourself? (1) Assigned (2) Allowed to choose
HCST12e (APPLY)	<i>27 words</i>	<i>12 words</i>	<i>18 words</i>

Appraisal

First, ORCM substituted “apartment or building” for the “this address” concept of the original question. Under different programs, however, respondents may be assigned to one (e.g., apartment) but not the other (they may choose the building). This inadvertently creates a double-barreled question. Which aspect of the phrase respondents are attending to when formulating their answer often cannot be determined unless they are specifically asked. More importantly without an additional question or scripted probe, the true meaning of their response would be unclear in the telephone survey. Second, ORCM’s report identified gradients of choice between programs that respondents cannot express in any version of this question. By introducing the response option “allowed to choose”, more attention may be directed at the choice aspect than intended. This may exacerbate a tendency to report the complex structure of choice over addressing the question’s main intent. Finally, the tone in the ORCM and SRD questions may express a level of subordination that some recipients may not want to acknowledge. Social desirability factors might induce such people to say they chose their residence by some degree, when they were essentially assigned to it.

Results, AHS4 (Assigned a Unit)

Response Behavior

Although respondents were supposed to select either “assigned” or “allowed to choose”, they often answered yes or no accompanied by a clarification. Also, they were inconsistent in whether they

associated yes or no with one or the other response options. (For some ‘no’ meant *assigned*, for others ‘no’ meant *allowed to choose*.) This is undesirable because interviewers will vary in whether and how well they probe the true meaning of a respondent’s answer.

Few respondents hesitated before responding. Where they did, it was usually to compile a story that accompanied the assignment or choice of their address, a justification of sorts for their answer.

Choice is Interpreted Broadly, Assigned is Used Narrowly

TBV recipients answered quickly and confidently with “allowed to choose”. (One exception was a respondent who said her social worker and her mother chose a place for her). Similarly, public housing residents responded quickly. Most of them ultimately admitted they were assigned a place, even when reluctant to say so. As expected, there was some social desirability pressure to express choice here. Respondents who needed to express choice at some level within the assignment process did so, even though it was a very limited choice.

(R21-Chicago) When probed how she had answered so quickly with ‘I was allowed to choose it myself’, she said: “No, because they give you options. You get three options to choose from.” She chose the one with the seniors rather than one of the other buildings where “drug addicts are hanging around.”

(R19-DC) “Yes I was allowed to choose.” Upon the interviewer rereading the question, she then said, “I guess in essence I was assigned to that.”

She (R19) was uncomfortable with the question and wanted to say that although she was assigned to the building, she chose the unit *within* the building. In her paraphrase, she perceived a negative intent in the question: “It is asking whether public housing told me this is the unit where I have to live.”

R19 also demonstrated that the phrase “apartment or building” created confusion about the question’s intent, or, minimally, that it implied that it was acceptable to address either level. Unlike R21, R19 made no reference to the ‘three choices’ policy.

Inconsistent Use of the Phrase “Apartment or Building”

As mentioned in the appraisal, the phrase “apartment or building” creates a double-barreled question. When interpreted this way, there are two levels to the question: 1) were you assigned to your building and 2) were you assigned to your apartment. Six respondents inferred that two questions were being asked and addressed them separately. With another five respondents who were TBV recipients, the broader issue of choice emerged. Not only could they choose the building and unit, they could also choose the *area* in which they would like to live. By area, they initially meant neighborhood; later they brought up the portability feature of the tenant-based voucher.

Subsidy Status Indicates at What Level the Question is Interpreted

Three methods were used to identify how respondents were interpreting this question. While talking through their response process (as requested through the think aloud technique in the cognitive protocol), respondents disclosed what concepts they were attending to (and not), how they were interpreting them, and what judgments they were making to arrive at their answers. Second, after they had answered the question, respondents were asked to paraphrase the question, which identified their perception of the overall intent of the item. Third, after finishing the entire series, respondents were asked to describe the process they went through to occupy their current residence. Among these three methods, results suggest

that interpretations of this question are inconsistent across all respondents, but within program type a pattern emerges that can be used to rectify the problems in this question.

All nine public housing residents were interpreting this question at the apartment-level. Of the nine, however, only six directly said they were assigned to an apartment. Although they sometimes discussed nuances within that assignment process, they were decisive in saying they were assigned to their place. The other three respondents said there was a policy to give them a choice among two or three apartments in the complex. They were not good options, judging by their negative descriptions, but it was still a degree of choice. Unlike the other public housing residents, this led them to select “allowed to choose” over “assigned”. This indicates that public housing respondents are not actually having difficulty understanding the intent of the question, rather, some are choosing during the judgment and reporting phases of the response process to provide information that is not relevant to the question. They, perhaps for social desirability reasons, want to convey what little choice they do have. To them, limited choice is not equivalent to assigned, nor is it the same as allowed to choose. It is, however, unlikely that the intent of the question is to capture limited choice here, or to have public housing residents in the same complex provide different answers based on their judgments.

All eight of the tenant-based voucher recipients interpreted this question at the building-level, i.e. they were able to choose the apartment complex (or townhouse) where they lived. In responding to this question, they often expressed the broader issue of choice inherent in their voucher type. They could choose the area or neighborhood, more so than in any other program. None of them indicated that their choices were limited by the parameters prescribed on the voucher form itself: size of unit, cost, area of PHA jurisdiction for the first year, etc. Freedom (or burden) to find their place overrode any other consideration of the meaning of this question. The most commonly mentioned limitation was finding a place within their budget with an agreeable landlord who would participate in the program. Because they saw this as the responsibility of being a program participant, it did not influence their answers. It is not clear how TBV respondents would answer this question if it specifically asked if they were assigned or chose their apartment. It is possible they would give more qualified and inconsistent answers if they were forced to acknowledge that the criteria on their voucher form meant a landlord could only offer them a limited choice of places within a complex.

Respondents who were neither in public housing or had vouchers had the most difficulty with this question (e.g., participants in other programs or those living in LIHTC properties). Four of these eight respondents saw this as a double-barreled question and answered it at the building- *and* apartment-level. Two addressed it only at the building-level, not mentioning apartment at all. The last two only answered in relation to the apartment level. Within each level, respondents were consistent: they chose their building or apartment complex and they were assigned their apartment. If the original intent of the question is to ask them whether they were assigned to their address, in most cases their apartment, then the issue of building choice is irrelevant. These respondents are essentially assigned to an apartment for which they are eligible by the management office that screens their application. They described a ‘take it or leave it’ scenario much like the public housing residents, but without being offered two or three options to choose from. This phenomenon was largely based on misperceptions; it appeared instead to be driven by the high demand, low supply nature of the low-income housing market.

As the question stands, these respondents are choosing which aspect of the question to address, sometimes addressing one or both levels. This will create opportunities for miscommunication between respondents and interviewers, and it will introduce response variance that is avoidable.

Using ‘Choice’ to Express Special Circumstances

Respondents sometimes selected “allowed to choose” to express special circumstances about arriving at their current address. For example, where projects were being demolished under the HOPE VI program,

respondents were allowed to choose among other public housing places or to go on a voucher program (e.g., R16-Chicago). Public housing residents often expressed skepticism toward vouchers, feeling more vulnerable where, under a voucher, they perceived that an individual landlord could capriciously raise the rent and they would be responsible for the difference between the new rent and the voucher. They also had concerns about the voucher program being cancelled, being evicted, becoming homeless and so on. A public housing unit was a more tangible benefit to them (a place to live) than a voucher receipt (a ‘ticket’ for a place to live.)

Other special circumstances arose, but their prevalence in the national survey would be difficult to infer from this small sample. For example, a project-based resident in Detroit (R5) was among the first to occupy a unit 23 years ago. She reported that she had some choice then that she understands new occupants no longer have. New residents are assigned a unit according to their needs. She was especially concerned about this because she is no longer eligible to stay in her townhouse. After 23 years she finally occupies it alone and management is trying to move her to a one-bedroom apartment.

Other Factors Mediating Assignment and Choice

Because owners often advertise that they are certified to accept Section 8 tenants, some renters responding to advertisements consider this to be *choice*. Even when they had used a housing authority list, respondents often said there were still choices within that list. For this reason they were reluctant to select “assigned” as their response. In addition, respondents who occupied a unit in a building that subsequently became certified for project-based assistance, LIHTC or vouchers felt they were allowed to choose their unit because their occupancy predated certification. It is probably correct for these respondents to say they chose their building. What is less clear is whether they are supposed to answer this way or that they were ultimately assigned a unit within a complex. Respondents are mixed in how they interpret the intent of this question and in how they respond given that perceived intent.

Additional Challenges to Identifying People Under Project-Based Vouchers

Respondents in LIHTC properties may or may not be participating in a voucher program, so tax-status is never a straight indication of subsidy status because it is a characteristic associated with the owner and his/her property. In any case, the tax-status is not a question in this series, nor could it be—respondents cannot be expected to know the property owner’s business. The relevance here is that subsidy recipients in any program except public housing could reside in an LIHTC property. The respondent may be low-income with no subsidy, they may be low-income under project-based assistance, or they may be under some state, local or privately funded program. In other words, there may be no subsidy, the subsidy may be attached to the unit, or the subsidy may be attached to the person. Thus a sample of three respondents within a large complex could yield several different and correct response scenarios.

Because the two subsequent voucher questions clearly identify the TBV recipients, only one challenge remains: distinguishing between other program and the non-program low-income residents. The application process that takes place at the leasing office in privately held low-income housing may be largely similar, or be perceived to be: each prospective occupant completes forms to establish their eligibility for reduced rent. In doing so, they become part of the owner’s record keeping system to meet the requirements of some other program (LIHTC, state, local or private programs, etc.). The process or respondents’ perceptions of it are too variable to ensure the question will get respondents in the same situation to answer in the same manner. As programs and associated concepts evolve over time, a workable solution may arise that is more tenable to respondents in these arrangements.

Summary

“Choice” is interpreted and assessed at a variety of levels for a variety of purposes. Sometimes respondents are expressing choice at the macro-level (building) and overlooking less choice at the

occupancy level. The reasons vary. 1) They may need to express a degree of independence and dignity in how they arrived at their address. 2) Special circumstances may mean ‘assigned’ does not adequately describe their residency process and the choices they did have to make. 3) Some subsidies allow a choice of different complexes, while others provide a choice of complexes and apartment (TBVs)—as long as it meets the criteria stipulated on the voucher and passes a HUD inspection. 4) Finally, where a complex has multiple buildings and a respondent is required to select one of three apartments, there is an implicit choice of building if the apartments are in different buildings.

In summary, respondents who err here either miss or avoid the question intent, which may be inadequately expressed in the first place. The inclusion of the word ‘building’ is probably intended to cover the situation of non-apartment dwellers (i.e. people who occupy townhomes, single family homes, etc.). Instead, it reframes the question and takes respondents off course. Also, the SRD question explicitly introduced the choice concept with the option “allowed to choose”. This added to inconsistencies in interpreting and choosing a response for all but the TBV recipients, who made optimal use of the choice concept. Overall, inconsistencies in interpretation and reporting here may make it difficult to distinguish among PBV recipients, LIHTC property renters, and other low-income renters who erroneously include themselves in this question series. It is easy to identify public housing residents who may answer this item incorrectly if they have already said that the housing authority is their landlord. Because choice is a main feature of the TBV program, none of the TBV respondents had problems with this question. They were unique in answering this item quickly, confidently and accurately. The two voucher questions that follow, however, make the asking of this question unnecessary. Ultimately, it may not need to be asked of these respondents.

3.5 HOUSING VOUCHERS (AHS5)

Question Intent

The purpose of this question is to identify households whose privately owned rental space is subsidized through tenant-based vouchers (TBVs). Again this is shorthand for five of the seven Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) programs funded by HUD offered through local housing authorities: Conversion Vouchers (CVs), Family Unification Vouchers (FUVs), Tenant Based Vouchers (TBVs), Vouchers for People with Disabilities (VPDs), and Welfare-to-Work Vouchers (WWVs), (HUD, Housing Choice Vouchers, 2004a).

Question Design

In an attempt to simplify the reading and processing of the question, the SRD version disaggregated the definition of a voucher from the question. Incidentally, respondents who have tenant-based vouchers would have just answered that they were allowed to choose their apartment in the previous question. To them, the choice aspect in the voucher question may seem redundant and perhaps annoying. In the current question order, however, it must be asked (again), i.e. retained, because choice is just one feature of a voucher. A different order with question skips would avoid the perceived redundancy of this question with AHS4 for tenant-based voucher recipients.

Figure 5: Housing Voucher Question History

	AHS Original	ORCM Recommended Revision	SRD Test
AHS5 HCST12f (VCHER)	6. Did a Public Housing Authority or some other similar agency give you a CERTIFICATE or VOUCHER to help pay for this unit? (Y/N)	5. Does your household have a housing voucher that allows you to choose where you live and pays for the rent? (Y/N)	5. A housing voucher gives a renter the right to choose where they live AND it helps pay for the rent. Does your household have a housing voucher? (Y/N/DK)
	<i>22 words</i>	<i>20 words</i>	<i>20+7 words</i>

Appraisal

There is some danger that interviewers will find the leading definition superfluous, especially if it proves to be annoying or unhelpful to respondents. And it is true that when the definition and question are combined, it would be more difficult for interviewers to alter the item. Because most respondents in the national sample, however, will not have housing vouchers, it may be best to keep the design tested by SRD. The SRD version will make the definition more salient to respondents who are unfamiliar with the program and its terminology.

In dropping the term certificate and the reference to the housing authority, this question relies perhaps too much on the voucher term. It may not be sufficient stimulus for people who use other terms for vouchers, especially in the case of project-based voucher recipients. That said, ‘voucher’ appeared to be the strongest term for this type of program across respondents in this round of testing.

Results, AHS5 (Voucher)

Response behavior

Tenant-based voucher (TBV) recipients came by their answers more quickly, confidently, and accurately. Public housing residents readily responded with a no here, unless they were completely unfamiliar with the voucher program. In that case, they spent some time considering the question before answering no—believing that if they had a voucher, they would know it. Some of the uninformed project-based voucher (PBV) recipients used the same strategy. For the uninformed, arriving at an answer was an effortful process, however this may have been caused in part by the interviewer’s request to ‘think aloud’ during their answers.

A Voucher is Tangible

The belief that a voucher must be a tangible item led public housing residents to correctly answer that they did not have one. The same construct led participants to also answer no, but erroneously.

(R6-VA) “I have a project-based voucher. I don’t have a Section 8 voucher. I do have a voucher of some kind but I have never seen it.”

Another PBV participant (R2-Chicago) did identify with qualifying for and living in a Section 8 property, but did not associate that with having a voucher. After most of the units in her building had later been certified, HUD had gone through and certified the entire complex. She had been living there for some time when her landlord told her that her unit had recently been certified, i.e. subsidized.

The TBV recipients often spoke of their vouchers as a tangible item, as did many people who did not have one. A TBV recipient in Maryland (R13) said:

“It’s a permission sheet to live at an apartment at a reduced rate.”

Another (R11-MD) said:

“[It’s a] paper that lets the landlord know [I] can afford the apartment; it’s my rent, my money.”

The respondent in a rent-controlled unit in the District of Columbia (R27) said:

“The difference between a voucher and a subsidy is [that with a voucher] they hand you the money. It’s like a check from the government.”

A PBV respondent in the District agreed, saying it was a “blank check” one could use to rent a place. Even public housing residents referred to a voucher as a piece of paper (R17-Chicago).

There is Only One Type of Voucher and it is Portable

Respondents who had heard about the features of tenant based vouchers, used the term voucher almost exclusively in reference to them.

(R2-Chicago, PBV) “A housing voucher is, with that you’re able to relocate... I could locate in another city or state or whatever.”

A few savvy respondents, usually TBV recipients, knew there were several types of vouchers.

(R14-Detroit, TBV) “Some vouchers only apply to certain buildings, especially in the case of seniors.”

R14 called them building-based vouchers and portable vouchers. Furthermore, if hers was a building-based voucher, R14 said she would have to say she did *not* have a voucher. Her reasons were unclear but seemed related to other respondents’ narrow use of the term voucher.

As did others, two Maryland respondents completely muddled the terms. One (R10) said: “A housing voucher is a certificate” then went on to say, “I have a section 8 voucher.” Another said, “I call it (his voucher) a certificate because I think that’s what they’re telling me. In that question you say voucher, I’m thinking voucher means certificate because it’s specific to me and basically they’re the same thing.” Maryland residents in one county only called them HCVs or housing choice vouchers. This is a term HUD also associates with the program, but its use was hardly universal among the respondents in this round of cognitive testing.

Summary

Full, even adequate expertise about the different voucher types does not reside with people not in public housing and not under federal tenant-based vouchers. Thus, these are the respondents who are most likely to misreport their subsidy status and type in this series. There are several possible explanations. Because property owners typically initiate the complex paperwork to certify a property, a thorough understanding of terms associated with a program that reduces their rent. That knowledge likely resides with owners rather than recipients. Because the ongoing interactions (payment, certification, etc.) are between the

owner-manager and the housing authority, these respondents may be less clear about their benefit—it is almost too indirect for them to report it as part of a formal housing program. Although they had all identified themselves as having some form a subsidy or reduced rent, they did not choose to express it other characteristics of their assistance through this question series. Older terms such as Section 8 or certificates still arise, but the voucher term is understood well by participants in those programs.

3.6 VOUCHER PORTABILITY (AHS6)

Question Intent

The purpose of this new question is to further reduce the number of false positive reports associated with the voucher program. Only TBVs provide true portability, i.e. not only can these participants move freely within the jurisdiction of the housing authority, they can also move between jurisdictions. Only respondents who have already said they have a voucher need to be asked this question. A person who reports they have a voucher but that it is not portable suggests an erroneous report, i.e. that they do not truly participate in the voucher program. (See the ORCM report for additional information on this finding).

Question Design

Other than changing ‘you’ to ‘your household’, this question was tested as recommended in the ORCM report. In fact ‘your household’ is probably not necessary because a voucher is assigned to a person within the household. ‘Your household’, however, would perhaps be helpful where the respondent is not the person named on the voucher.

Figure 6: Voucher Portability Question History

	AHS Original	ORCM Recommended Revision	SRD Test
AHS6	(New question)	6. Can you use your housing voucher to move to another location? (Y/N)	6. Can your household use its housing voucher to move to another location? (Y/N/DK)
new		<i>11 words</i>	<i>12 words</i>

Appraisal

“Move to another location” is more ambiguous than the question intends. “Another location” could be interpreted to mean several things: another unit in the same building, complex, neighborhood, town, or state.

Again, because a voucher is assigned to a person not a household, it is probably acceptable to use the term *you* rather than *household* in this question. It is probably acceptable in the case of a proxy respondent as well since the first question (recertification) in the series already establishes the household as the reference.

It is often difficult for respondents to carry forward the meaning of a new or unfamiliar technical term across several questions. The previous question provides a definition of a housing voucher. It may be useful to include the definition on screen with the portability question as well. Interviewers may need to

repeat it as needed to respondents who do not readily understand the voucher concept, i.e. many of the non-TBV voucher recipients.

Results, AHS6 (Voucher Portability)

Response behavior

Respondents with TBVs answered ‘yes’ without hesitation but often added qualifying information. People who knew little about vouchers were learning about the portability feature through this question for the first time. Those reporting no voucher felt this question did not apply to them, but if they were familiar with vouchers at all, they often knew about portability. It was correct for all but the TBV recipients to answer no to the portability question. Since PBV recipients had already screened themselves out of the portability by saying they did not have a voucher (AHS5), this question did not meet its objective.

“Portable” Varies According to Program Awareness

Portability was the second most familiar voucher feature to TBV recipients and others aware of the voucher program. Although they enthusiastically elaborated that portability gave them freedom to move anywhere in the United States, the rules regarding a transfer were equally prominent. It was not clear whether curiosity made the rules salient or the housing authority engrained them during enrollment. Minimally, people knew they could transfer into another housing program’s jurisdiction, and most knew that meant national mobility.

The possibilities afforded by portable vouchers fueled a lot of optimism and grand ideas, which was motivation enough to learn the rules even if their understanding was variable and imprecise.

(R7-Chicago) To transfer “you have to give the landlord a month’s notice and get moving papers from CHA.”

(R14-Detroit) “[The] voucher is portable across the US after the first year in the first program jurisdiction.”

(R10-Maryland) This respondent described the process in great detail: find a place, find out the equivalent subsidy amount, have paperwork faxed between the two states, have all her utilities paid up, notify landlord 2 months before the lease is up, etc.

Respondents shared ideas made possible by the portability of the voucher. A Chicago resident remarked, “I can move to Baltimore, I can move to Washington, D.C., ... wherever... I could go to Norfolk.” Another said, “another location” means, “Like if I have a family in Iowa, I can move to Iowa because they accept (this) Section 8 (TBV).” Still another says, “Like if I wanted to move to Florida, I could move to Florida with that.” Even public housing residents catch on to this feature: “Like I said, they said you could move to Hawaii. I mean I could go to Arkansas with it if I want to. It sounds good.”

The themes emerging from these examples are, as one respondent said (R26), “[You can move] from where you live into a different area. You could move to a better area.” Better often meant closer to family, away from the unsafe neighborhoods, and to more diverse communities.

Summary

Because only TBV recipients had said yes to the voucher question, they are the only people who needed to hear the question about voucher portability. In our test, however, the portability question was asked of all respondents in order to understand the knowledge base among the community of housing subsidy recipients. Awareness of the portability feature in fact was high among non-TBV participants, although secondhand knowledge was often less precise. For example, only non-TBV participants interpreted “another location” narrowly. To them portability often meant moving to different complexes—as opposed to different program jurisdictions or other states. The portability question is a strong measure by which to identify false positive reports related to vouchers.

3.7 RENT CONTROL AND RENT STABILIZATION (AHS7)

Question Intent

The purpose of this question is to identify whether a respondent lives in a unit whose rent increases are subject to limits through state or local housing laws.

Question Design

No changes to the design were made for this round of testing.

Figure 7: Rent Control Question History

	AHS Original	ORCM Recommended Revision	SRD Test
AHS7	7. Does the government limit the rent on the unit through rent control or rent stabilization? (Y/N)	(Not included)	7. Does the government limit the rent on the unit through rent control or rent stabilization? (Y/N/DK)
HCST12g (RCNTRL)	<i>15 words</i>		<i>15 words</i>

Appraisal

Rent Control and Rent Stabilization have specific, technical meanings. Being able to answer this question essentially becomes a test of knowledge. Where respondents lack a personal reference with these terms, they are likely to rely on context and neighboring terms to understand it. Considering the questions just asked and answered, respondents may assume it relates to their subsidies and choose the wrong response.

Results, AHS7 (Rent Control)

Response Behavior

Most respondents were stymied by these terms. People got to the wrong answer at different rates depending on how quickly they misinterpreted the terms rent control and rent stabilization.

Simple Words Breed Creative and Taxing Errors

Overall, respondents were mired down trying to assign meaning to these unfamiliar, technical terms. Most often they tried to relate it to their personal situation. Constructing responses was effortful, but too often wrong or indecisive. Of the 27 respondents, 10 were either completely sure or talked themselves into saying that their subsidy was a form of rent control. They erroneously answered yes by recasting the question to say, “Is my rent controlled?” To this they deduced yes, it was.

In focusing on the control aspect of rent control, it is clear how respondents derived their interpretation of it to answer the question. The concept of *ceiling rent* was volunteered several times by public housing residents when paraphrasing the question.

(R16-Chicago) With confidence, “At one time, yes, but now the ceiling is off the rent.” When asked who controls the rent, she said, “The city or HUD, one, I’m not quite sure...”

(R14-Detroit) “You pay a minimum which is 50 [dollars] and everything is based off the minimums which is like I’ve heard is 30 percent... but I don’t know if there’s a ceiling or not.”

It took another 10 people about as much effort and time to conclude they simply did *not* know because they could not comprehend what the terms meant. This response was most common among TBV recipients. A Chicago resident (R7) even lacked confidence in her uncertainty saying, “I guess, I don’t really know.”

Respondents are clearly working too hard at a question that is completely out of scope for them. They typically focused on the term rent control in trying to understand the question or when asked to paraphrase it. Few mentioned the term rent stabilization at all, unless specifically probed by the interviewers.

The Meaning of “The Unit”

When probed on the meaning of “the unit” in this question, some respondents thought the phrase referred to the building. Apartment renters knew it meant their apartment unit. Although people in other types of housing did not have significant problems with the phrase, the term seemed unnatural. When paraphrasing, people substituted phrases such as “my place”, “my home”, “my efficiency”, or “my townhouse”.

Summary

Rent control and stabilization programs are so rare and geographically isolated that the confusion this question caused was not surprising. Respondents were inventive in relating these terms to their situation, but they were completely wrong to do so. Restricting this question to the limited areas where it might apply (through skip parameters that feed off the geo-coding data for the interview case) would save interviewers and many respondents much time and effort, effort that ultimately produces inaccurate and uncertain answers. It may also help to offer a brief definition of the term to be used by interviewers as needed.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The goal of the housing subsidy question series is to identify the housing subsidy status of sampled households in the AHS. On their own, the first two questions (recertification and subsidy) achieve that main goal. Judging by how respondents understood and answered them, the revisions constitute an improvement in overall response accuracy for program participants.

How non-program participants would perform in this series was not the focus of this research. There were several reasons, however, to believe there will be fewer errors among them in the future. First, the initial question is worded more strongly by asking about required reporting behavior that determines the rent amount. Non-program participants may indeed be asked about their income and who lives with them when they rent a new apartment, but their rent is not adjusted according to those factors. Second, the word “subsidy” was added to the second question. This is a term that implies some type of *program* enrollment and seems to be interpreted consistently across respondents. There is no reason to think that non-program participants would have a different interpretation of this term that would cause them to answer incorrectly here. The phrase “housing program” may accomplish the same goal without the hidden hazards of “subsidy”. Third, in their investigation of subsidy false positives, ORCM indicated that many of the false positives were in fact program participants who were imprecise in reporting their program status, answering some questions correctly, others incorrectly. Improvements across the series (revised order and skip logic) should reduce this problem.

The other purpose of this question series is to identify the specific housing program in which a respondent participates (AHS3-AHS6). ORCM’s introduction of new terms created additional comprehension errors for respondents (e.g., landlord). The questions tested by SRD still contained some difficult technical or vague terms (e.g., voucher and housing authority). In some cases, additional explanations or emphasis should be provided on interview screens and in the interviewer manual and training. Elsewhere, minor wording changes that do not require additional testing or revisions in the question order can either significantly reduce or avoid response errors entirely. With these recommendations, it should be possible to correctly identify most public housing residents and tenant-based voucher recipients.

It is still difficult to distinguish program types among recipients of other programs. They provide answers similar those reported by people in other state, local or private housing programs—they answer the screening questions affirmatively, they do not have vouchers, and they are mixed in how they address the public housing questions. Statistically speaking and for analysis purposes, these respondents more similar to each other across other survey questions than their public housing or tenant-based voucher recipients anyway. The intention of this series is, in fact, not to distinguish these participants from each other; rather it is to distinguish them from tenant-based voucher recipients, public housing residents, and non-program participants. If it is sufficient to know this, simply that they are in some housing program, this series is largely successful in doing so. These respondents are in a fairly homogeneous group of low-income respondents who can be compared to people in other programs (TBVs or public housing) and to low-income non-program participants. Lacking good consistent knowledge of the mechanisms in their programs, these respondents do not seem to be able to report much more than what we have asked them.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the problems identified in this research can be addressed through changes in wording, question order and/or interviewer training and documentation. It is still difficult to distinguish project-based voucher recipients from residents in low-income tax credit properties or other state and local programs. The subtleties between these programs are not apparent to the participants. Also, they use varying terms to denote what may or may not be a bona fide housing support program—largely because the property owners deal with program paperwork more often and deal more directly with the housing authorities than do their tenants. A complete list of question wording follows these recommendations and is accompanied by a flowchart to address programming requirements for the survey instrument. The trail of question changes and recommendations is documented in Appendix D and Section 5.2 respectively.

5.1 Question by Question Recommendations

AHS1, Recertification (*HCSTa/RENEW*)

Recommendation 1: With additional emphasis on the nature and depth of reporting required, the recertification question may be use more or less as tested by SRD. Respondents had no trouble listing the breadth and depth of items they must report during recertification, not only for themselves but all household members. Across items, reporting income *and* who lives with them were most salient; “and” should be capitalized in the survey question to ensure the emphasis is delivered consistently across respondents. Given their financial circumstances, respondents were keenly aware of the direct bearing of these two items on their rent determination. They were quick to note that although recertification may be an annual process, any change in household wealth or composition had to be reported on a flow basis or they would owe ‘back rent’. Although non-program participants may also be required to report income and co-occupants to a landlord, that information does not dictate their rent. Adding emphasis to the reporting requirements should further reduce false positive reports of program participation.

Recommendation 2: Question administration and respondent comprehension can be improved by defining the term “recertification” in one sentence followed by the substantive survey question using the term. As tested, the recertification question is long and complex. Such questions invite interruptions, repeated readings, and non-standard administration—adding to respondent burden and response errors. For example, a truncated reading of the question would omit the key relationship between rent determination and reporting requirements and could erroneously bring non-program participants into the series. Although program participants had little trouble with this question, most AHS respondents do not live in subsidized housing. Breaking the question into two parts should improve standardization and question comprehension.

AHS2, Subsidy (*HCST12c/SUBRNT*)

Recommendation 3: The revised question design should be revisited to ensure it still meets its original intent. The wording changes in the two rounds of testing seem to narrow the scope of this question. The emphasis shifts from whether the government underwrites the cost of the unit to whether the respondent pays a lower rent because of a subsidy. Respondents answered correctly anyway because they inferred that they were really being asked whether they participated in a government program. “Program” enrollment seemed more clear to respondents and may perform better in the question because some respondents do not think of their benefit as a subsidy.

Recommendation 4: Further testing of the subsidy question may produce a stronger measure.

Although some respondents raised complex objections to the phrase “pay a lower rent”, a concept included in each revision of the question, their objections did not induce response errors; all answered the question incorrectly. In all three metropolitan areas where testing took place, two new concepts emerged: “ceiling rent”, the maximum rent they could be charged as a program participant, and “market rent” the rent they would pay if they were not in a program. Although these concepts could be included in the subsidy question, the scope of this research was too narrow to assure broad and universal interpretation of them.

AHS3, Housing Authority as Landlord (HCST12d/PROJ)

Recommendation 5: The housing authority question should be asked as tested. As tested, this item will perform well for public housing residents. For other participants, the problem caused by the introduction of the term “landlord” can be avoided through a revised question order. For respondents who say “yes” the housing authority is their landlord, AHS4 (assignment/choice of unit) can be skipped and stored in the interview data as “assigned”.

Recommendation 6: To avoid response errors, the housing authority question should be moved and placed after the two voucher questions (AHS5 & AHS6). This revised order will mean this question will not need to be asked of respondents in voucher programs. Because all voucher participants are in privately owned housing, none of them has the housing authority as a landlord. Eliminating this question for voucher participants will also reduce the time needed to administer this series.

Respondents who report a Housing Authority (HA) as their landlord do not need to be asked whether they were assigned or were allowed to choose their unit. It can be assumed they were either assigned a unit or were given a very limited choice among units. The system can store a value of “assigned” for all who report the HA as their landlord, reducing series administration time and misreporting as seen in the cognitive interviews.

AHS4, Assigned or Allowed to Choose Apartment (HCST12e/APPLY)

Recommendation 7: Housing type collected earlier in the interview should be used to provide a question fill in the unit choice question. With the phrase “apartment or building”, this item became a double-barreled question. Respondents either addressed one, the other or both levels. This response behavior was too variable and produced extremely inconsistent answers even within a housing program group. Replacing “apartment or building” in the question stem with a data fill from the housing type question earlier in the survey interview will ensure this question is interpreted at the level intended, i.e. the sample address regardless of structure type.

AHS5, Housing Voucher (HCST12f/VHER)

Recommendation 8: The housing voucher questions should be moved to follow the second question in this series, the subsidy question (HCST12c/SUBRNT). This allows these respondents to skip two questions that have obvious answers for them, minimizes administration time, and reduces the opportunity to make response errors. If the respondent says that he/she has a voucher (HCST12f) and it is portable (new question), the housing authority question (HCST12d/PROJ) can be instrument-coded to “no” and the assignment/choice question (HCST12e/APPLY) can be instrument-coded to “allowed to

choose”. For further guidance, see *Appendix E, Revised Question Flow for Housing Subsidy Questions* or *Figure 8, Flowchart for the Revised Question Order*.

AHS6, Voucher Portability (*New Question*)

Recommendation 9: The question about voucher portability should be asked as tested. This is a new question intended to reduce the number of false positives associated with program participation and housing vouchers. Portability was the more salient feature of vouchers to respondents who actually had them.

AHS7, Rent Control

Recommendation 10: The survey instrument logic should be written so that this item is only asked of respondents in pre-designated areas within New York, New Jersey, California, the District of Columbia and Maryland. Rent control and stabilization programs are rare and geographically isolated. Because these terms are unfamiliar to most respondents, they go to inordinate lengths to assign erroneous meanings to them and end up producing false positives. This means that the majority of sampled households are being asked a question that confuses and does not apply to them, increasing interview time and respondent burden. Revised instrument logic will improve data validity, and reduce edit and analysis failures. Where it is asked, the phrase “the unit” could also be replaced with an instrument fill of the respondent’s answer to the earlier housing type questions (HU1/HTYPE).

5.2 Recommended Question Order and Wording Changes to the Housing Subsidy Questions in the AHS

Names in parenthesis following each question shows location in current questionnaire and variable name.

[Introduction] Some rental agreements include a special re-certification process.

1. Re-certification means a renter is REQUIRED to report everyone who lives with them, all jobs, all savings and sources of income AND this determines the amount of rent they have to pay. Do you have to re-certify to determine the amount of rent you pay? (*HCST12a, RENEW*)
Yes No DK

2. Is your rent amount lower because you are in either a Federal, State or local government housing program? (*HCST12c, SUBRNT*)
Yes (Continue)
No/DK ([If 1 is No or DK then skip to 7] OR [If 1 is Yes then continue with 3])

3. A housing voucher gives a renter the right to choose where they live AND it helps pay for the rent. Does your household have a housing voucher? (*HCST12f, VCHER*)
Yes (Continue)
No/DK (Skip to 5)

4. Can you use your housing voucher to move to another location? (New Question, suggest *VCHRMOV*)
Yes (Store *No* in 5 and *Allowed to choose* in 6 and then skip to 7)
No/DK (Skip to 6)

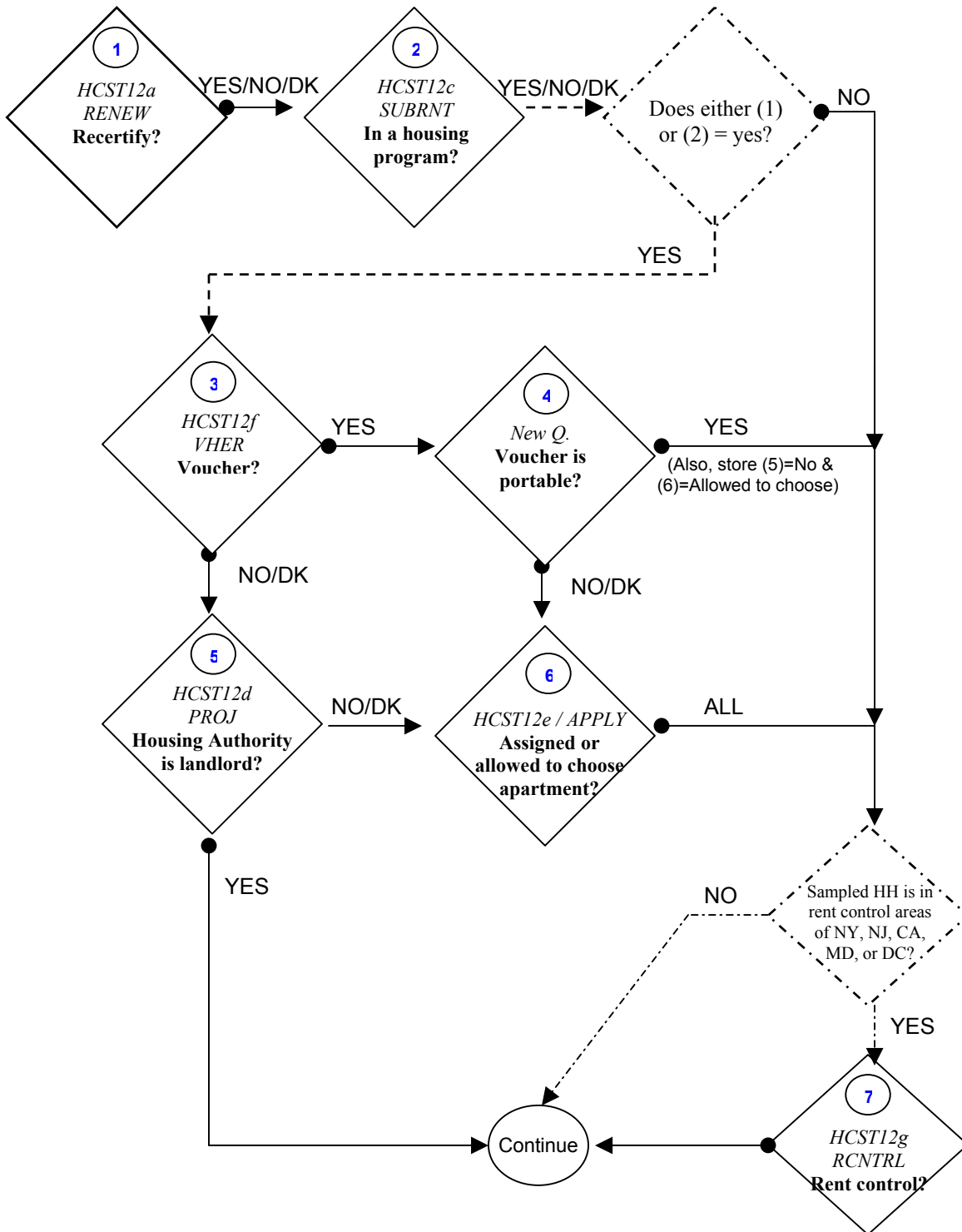
5. Is the housing authority your landlord? (*HCST12d, PROJ*)
Yes (Store “assigned” in 6 and then Skip to end of module)
No/DK (*Continue*)

6. Was your household assigned to this specific (house, building, manufactured/mobile home, living quarters), or were you allowed to choose it yourself? (*HCST12e, APPLY*)
Assigned Allowed to choose

[LOGIC: Only ask 7 if case is in a PSU/county where rent control exists (e.g., parts of NY, NJ, CA, MD, or DC), else skip to end of module]

7. Does the government limit the rent on your (house, apartment, manufactured/mobile home, living quarters) through rent control or rent stabilization? (*HCST12g, RCNTRL*)
Yes No DK

Figure 8: Flowchart for the Revised Question Order Recommended by SRD



6 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank SRD colleagues Anna Chan, Patricia Goerman and Lorraine Randall for their assistance in planning, conducting and summarizing this round of cognitive research on the American Housing Survey. Considerable technical assistance by the following individuals assured the program relevance of this work: Jane Kneessi, Barbara Williams, David Vandenbroucke, Craig Pritzl, and Gemma Furno.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Cognitive Interview Protocol for Pretesting the Housing Subsidy Series in the American Housing Survey

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

American Housing Survey, Housing Subsidy Series – July 2004

INTRODUCTION

- Testing new questions to be part of a national survey about housing
- Type of survey you'd be asked to complete over the phone
- Purpose: to see how Questions work for you.

PERMISSION TO TAPE (REQUIRED)

- Your answers are confidential-- only used by CB employees working on this project.
- Participation is voluntary. You can decline to answer any question.
- Purpose of taping: to review and summarize this work overall.

Q1 Do I have your permission to tape our conversation (for research purposes)?

Yes -- Have them SIGN CONSENT FORM.

No -- (*Conduct interview without taping.*)

GENERAL PROBES

How/What are you feeling/thinking?

Tell me more about that. Anything else?

You used the term () in your answer. What does () mean to you in this question?

I'm not sure I got that right. You said (repeat their answer/paraphrase). Is that right?

How sure are you about that?

OBSERVATIONS

OBSERVE R's pace, affect, confusion, etc., during their listening and formulation of answers. Make copious notes, because these features will not be reflected on the audiotape (of course).

Q2 Do you rent or own your place (the unit where they live)?

Rent Own Other _____

Q3 How long have you lived there? _____

TASK ORIENTATION (REQUIRED)

This is not a test. There are no right/wrong answers.

I'm interested in your answers, but I'm even more interested in what you're thinking and feeling as you listen, as you decide and give your answers to the survey questions. As much as possible, please share that out loud (what you're thinking and feeling). I'll remind you as we go along.

At times I may have to move us along to make sure we cover all the questions. If you have a question, I'll make a note and we'll come back to it at the end.

Any questions before we get started?

Okay, be sure to share out loud what's going through your mind (what you're thinking) as you listen and work through your answer (to the survey question.) The first question is...

AHS1: Each year, as part of your rental agreement, is your household required to complete recertification by reporting income AND who lives with you to determine the amount of rent you pay?

Yes No (Don't know)

- (Paraphrase) Tell me now in your own words (IYOW), what this question is getting at. (If verbatim repeat, ask--) Thank you. What does that mean—in your own words?
- (CLARIFYING PROBES for TERMS/RESPONSE/BEHAVIOR that is unclear to you for which you feel they should be verbalizing. NO in-depth probing yet. CIRCLE any words/phrases they emphasize.)

Help me understand (their term)... What does (their term/phrase) mean (to you) in this question (ITQ)?

I noticed you (affect/behavior/hesitated). What were you thinking about? (Just clarify, do not probe beyond that at this time.)

AHS2: Does your household pay a lower rent because it receives a rental subsidy?

Yes No (Don't know)

- (CLARIFYING PROBES for TERMS/RESPONSE/BEHAVIOR that is unclear to you for which you feel they should be verbalizing. NO in-depth probing yet. CIRCLE any words/phrases they emphasize.)

Help me understand (their term)... What does (their term/phrase) mean (to you) ITQ?

I noticed you (affect/behavior/hesitated). What were you thinking about? (Do not probe beyond that at this time.)

AHS3: Is the housing authority your landlord?

Yes No (Don't know)

- (CLARIFYING PROBES for TERMS/RESPONSE/BEHAVIOR that is unclear to you for which you feel they should be verbalizing. NO in-depth probing yet.)

What does (their term/phrase) mean (to you) in ITQ?

I noticed you/r (affect/behavior/hesitated). What were you thinking about? (Tell me more. Anything else?)

- You answered YES/NO. Who is your landlord? How often do you interact with your landlord? (How? Tell me more. Anything else?)
- (IF NEEDED) Who is the “housing authority”? (Where are they? What do they do? Who deals with them? Tell me more about that. Anything else?)

RETROSPECTIVE AHS1-AHS3

Before we go on, I want to briefly go back to the first 3 survey questions.

- Tell me about the process you go through to rent this/your place? (PROBE key terms they use, their use/meaning to Resp.)
- (Interviewer: paraphrase process as described by Respondent). (If process labeled by Respondent) So you would call this process _____?

That process begins with (paraphrase and confirm what they said)..
And includes (paraphrase)..
That process ends with (paraphrase and confirm what they said)...

This (process/their term)... how often do you do this?
Who initiates it? Who does it? Where?
(Write down names/terms/labels/steps/places.)
So, (person) does (process) when (x-occurs/timeframe). Do I have that right?

The first survey question reads...

AHS1: Each year, as part of your rental agreement, is your household required to complete recertification by reporting income AND who lives with you to determine the amount of rent you pay?

The question mentions a “rental agreement”. What does that mean to you ITQ?
(What do you consider to be part of the “rental agreement” as it is used ITQ?)

(Reread question if necessary) What does “recertification” mean to you ITQ?

The question asks if you are “required to” complete recertification. What are the requirements?/What’s required? (What determines the amount of rent you pay for this (unit)? Tell me more about that. Anything else?)

Why does (recertification) have to be done? (How is it related to the rental agreement? Any other reason it’s asked?)

(IF NECESSARY-- What decides your subsidy amount?)

The second survey question reads...

AHS2: Does your household pay a lower rent because it receives a rental subsidy?

What is a rental subsidy? (What does “rental subsidy” mean ITQ?)
 (Tell me more about that. Anything else?) How does it work (lower the rent)?

(EXPLORE other terms based on their answer.)

Are rental subsidies sometimes called (their term)?

Are there names (words) you’ve heard OTHER people use for a rental subsidy? (What? Tell me what that means? Anything else?)

What term/words do people usually use? (Which people? Renters, landlords, others?)

♣END OF RETROSPECTIVE for AHS1-3♣

Okay, let’s get back to rest of the survey questions. Again, as you answer the questions, talk your way through them... anything you’re thinking about, as you decide on and give your answer.

AHS4: Was your household assigned to this specific apartment or building, or were you allowed to choose it yourself?

	Assigned	Allowed to choose
--	----------	-------------------

- (RESPONSE BEHAVIOR) I noticed you answered that (quickly/with hesitation/affect). Was it easy/difficult to answer? Why? (What made it easy/hard?)
- (PARAPHRASE) Tell me now IYOW, what is this question asking (getting at)?

 (If verbatim repeat, ask--) What does that mean—in your own words?
 Help me understand (their term)... What does (their term/phrase) mean (to you) in this question (ITQ)?

Okay, the fifth survey question is... (think aloud).

AHS5: A *housing voucher* gives a renter the right to choose where they live AND it helps pay for the rent. Does your household have a housing voucher?

Yes	No	(Don’t know)
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- (CLARIFYING PROBES for TERMS/RESPONSE/BEHAVIOR that is unclear to you for which you feel they should be verbalizing. NO in-depth probing yet. CIRCLE any words/phrases they emphasize.)

 What does (their term/phrase) mean (to you) in ITQ?
 I noticed you/r (affect/behavior/hesitated). What were you thinking about? (Tell me more. Anything else?)

Okay, the sixth question is... (think aloud)

AHS6: Can your household use its housing voucher to move to another location?
 Yes No (Don't know)

- (CLARIFYING PROBES for TERMS/RESPONSE/BEHAVIOR that is unclear to you for which you feel they should be verbalizing. NO in-depth probing yet. CIRCLE any words/phrases they emphasize.)

What does (their term/phrase) mean (to you) in ITQ?

I noticed you/r (affect/behavior/hesitated). What were you thinking about? (Tell me more. Anything else?)

The seventh question is...

AHS7: Does the government limit the rent on the unit through rent control or rent stabilization?
 Yes No (Don't know)

- (PARAPHRASE) Tell me now in your own words (IYOW), what this question is getting at. (If verbatim repeat, ask--) Thank you, but what does that mean—in your own words?
- (CLARIFYING PROBES for TERMS/RESPONSE/BEHAVIOR that is unclear to you for which you feel they should be verbalizing. NO in-depth probing yet. CIRCLE any words/phrases they emphasize.)

What does (their term/phrase) mean (to you) in ITQ?

I noticed you/r (affect/behavior/hesitated). What were you thinking about? (Tell me more. Anything else?)

♣ *RETROSPECTIVE for AHS4-AHS7* ♣

The fourth question read...

AHS4: Was your household assigned to this specific apartment or building, or were you allowed to choose it yourself? Assigned Allowed to choose

- (PROCESS) Tell me about how you got in this particular unit. (Tell me more. Paraphrase/confirm. Anything else?)

The fifth question read...

AHS5: A *housing voucher* gives a renter the right to choose where they live AND it helps pay for the rent. Does your household have a housing voucher?

Yes No (Don't know)

What is a housing voucher IYOW? (Are there different kinds? What are they? Anything else?)

(IF YES) What kind of voucher do you have? (Tell me more. Anything else?)

The sixth question read...

AHS6: **Can your household use its housing voucher to move to another location?**

“another location” means/includes...

The last question read...

AHS7: **Does the government limit the rent on the unit through rent control or rent stabilization?**

Who limits the rent? (Who/where are they? Tell me more. Anything else?)

“the unit” means ITQ...

“rent control” and “rent stabilization” mean ITQ... (Have you heard of rent control/rent stab.? What is it? Who gets it?)

♣*END OF RETROSPECTIVE for AHS4-7*♣

Conclusion

GENERAL FOLLOW_UP: (What are your/do you have any) general reactions to survey questions survey? (Hand out list of survey questions.)

Are there any words or ideas you feel some people would have trouble understanding? (OR would not use when talking housing subsidies?)

Are there any questions people might find **difficult** to answer? Why?

Are there any question people might find too **sensitive**, or wouldn't want to answer? (Why? Tell me more? Anything else?)

General HOUSEHOLD Questions

A. IF 2+ adult person household, ask--

Who usually takes the rent over (to the landlord) for this HH?

Who usually does the paperwork for renting this home?

If your household were selected for the actual national survey (where these questions will be included), who would be the best person to answer the housing subsidy questions?

B. IF NECESSARY, ask aloud (otherwise field code)—

To make sure we include a variety of people in our research for this survey, so I have a few questions just about you. About how old are you (+/- 10 years ☺)?

Your home is in—

City Suburb Other _____
Town Rural/Country

How would you describe your race/ethnicity?

White Hispanic
Black/African American Non-Hispanic
Asian/Pacific Islander Other _____
Other _____

Type of housing:

Apartment Townhome/Flat/Rowhouse
Single Family Detached Home Mobile Home
Other _____

How would you describe Neighborhood/Location of Home

How many people usually live here, including children?

Do you have any other questions before we finish?

THANK YOU. (Remit payment, have form signed.)

Appendix B: Item Responses by Type of Subsidy

Table B1: *Project-based Participants'*
Response Distribution (n=5)

Resp.	Place	Q1			Q2			Q3			Q4		Q5			Q6			Q7		
		Must recertify?			Has subsidy?			Housing Authority is landlord?			Assigned or chose unit?		Has voucher?			Voucher is portable?			Unit under rent control?		
		yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk	assigned	chose	yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk
R2	Chicago	X			X				X				X				X				X
R3	DC	X			X			X					X			X				X	
R4	Detroit	X			X				X				X					NA			X
R5	Detroit	X			X				X		X			X				NA			X
R6	VA	X			X				X		X			X			X				X
	<i>freq</i>	5			5			1	2	2	2	3	1	4	1	2	2	1	2	2	

Table B2: *Tenant-based Voucher Participants'*
Response Distribution (n=8)

Resp.	Place	Q1			Q2			Q3			Q4		Q5			Q6			Q7				
		Must recertify?			Has subsidy?			Housing Authority is landlord?			Assigned or chose unit?		Has voucher?			Voucher is portable?			Unit under rent control?				
		yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk	assigned	chose	yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk		
R7	Chicago	X			X			X				X			X						X		
R8	Chicago	X			X			X				X			X				X				
R9	Chicago	X			X				X			X			X						X		
R10	MD	X			X				X			X			X						X		
R11	MD	X			X			X				X			X						X		
R12	MD	X			X				X			X			X						X		
R13	VA	X			X				X		X			X			X				X		
R14*	Detroit	X			X				X			X			X			X			X		
	<i>freq</i>	8			8			3	4	1	1	7	8		8			8			2	2	4

*R14 lives in an LIHTC property with her tenant-based voucher.

Table B3: Public Housing Participants' Response Distribution (n=9)

Resp.	Place	Q1			Q2			Q3			Q4		Q5			Q6			Q7					
		Must recertify?			Has subsidy?			Housing Authority is landlord?			Assigned or chose unit?		Has voucher?			Voucher is portable?			Unit under rent control?					
		yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk	yes	No	dk	assigned	chose	yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk			
R16	Chicago	X			X			X				X			X			X			X			
R17	Chicago	X				X		X			X			X			X						X	
R18	Chicago	X			X				X		X			X				NA			X			
R19	DC	X			X			X				X		X			X					X		
R20	DC	X			X			X			X			X			X				X			
R21	DC	X				X		X				X		X			X						X	
R22	Detroit	X			X			X			X			X				X				X		
R25	MD*	X			X				X		X			X			X				X			
R26	MD	X			X			X			X			X			X						X	
		<i>freq</i>			9			7 2			7 2			6 3		9			3 4 2			4 2 3		

* Senior housing resident

Table B4: Other Subsidized Housing Participants Response Distribution (n=5)

Resp.	Place	Type	Q1			Q2			Q3			Q4		Q5			Q6			Q7					
			Must recertify?			Has subsidy?			Housing Authority is landlord?			Assigned or chose unit?		Has voucher?			Voucher is portable?			Unit under rent control?					
			yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk	assigned	chose	yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk	yes	no	dk			
R13	DC	Rent Control		X			X			X			X		X			X			X				
R15	Detroit	LIHTC	X			X				X			X		X				NA		X				
R23*	Detroit	LIHTC	X			X				X			X		X				NA		X				
R24*	Detroit	LIHTC	X				X				X		X		X				NA				X		
R16	MD	HOPWA	X			X				X			X		X			X			X				
			<i>freq</i>			4 1			3 1 1			1 2 2			2 3		5			2 3			4 1		

Rent Control is a program under District of Columbia law that places a rent ceiling on units owned by landlords with 6 or more rental properties in the District.

LIHTC stands for Low-income Housing Tax Credit. It is a federal tax program whereby owners of privately owned properties receive a tax credit for renting to low-income persons.

*These respondents were recruited as Public Housing respondents, but actually lived a certified Sec. 8 LIHTC property.

HOPWA = Housing Opportunities for People with Aids operated by the HOC of Montgomery County, MD.

Appendix C: A Comparison of Housing Subsidy Programs by Type

Table C1: A Comparison of Housing Subsidy Programs by Type

Characteristics	SECTION 8 Vouchers		Public Housing	LIHTC ⁶
	Project-based	Tenant-based		
Privately owned housing?	Yes	Yes	No! (Owned and managed by PHA ⁷)	Yes
Renter signs a lease with...	Landlord	Landlord	PHA	Landlord
Voucher issued to renter?	No. Person is eligible and referred to a list of places.	Yes	No	None issued. TBV or PBV can apply.
Application begins (where)?	Usually referred to list of Section 8 certified places by PHA after getting on waiting list for other programs.	PHA	PHA	Leasing Office.
Renter finds own apartment (unit)?	Answer depends on how person perceives certified list, responsibility and choice.	Yes!	Assigned by PHA.	Yes
Apartment is assigned?	Yes, based on criteria and usually 'take it or leave it.'	No (may find other place and any place within criteria.)	Yes (sometimes given three options).	Yes, based on criteria.
Contract parties	Eligibility relates to whether person meets program requirements but mostly whether landlord can bill PHA. Renter applies to Landlord. PHA signs contract with Landlord for subsidy payments.	Same as left.	Resident and PHA.	Renter and Landlord.
Portability? (Can leave unit and use voucher elsewhere.)	No. (Voucher is tied to specific rental unit. To move, must reapply)	YES! (After a period, can use voucher for any unit nationwide that meets PHAs standards.)	No.	NA
Examples	Apartment complex has some units or whole buildings certified under Section 8.	- Tenant-based Voucher - Mainstream Voucher ⁸ - Family Unification Voucher ⁹ - Conversion Voucher ¹⁰ - Designated Housing V ¹¹ - Certain Development V ¹²	- Low income "projects" - Senior Housing - HOPE VI - PHA units regardless of type of housing	NA

⁶ LIHTC = Low Income Housing Tax Credit property, i.e. a property where the owner receives a tax credit in exchange for renting to low-income households.

⁷ PHA=Public Housing Authority

⁸ Mainstream Vouchers are for low-income families having a disabled member.

⁹ Family Unification Vouchers are for low-income families for whom lack of adequate housing is the primary factor in the separation, of threat of imminent separation, of children from their families or in the prevention of reunifying the

Table C1: A Comparison of Housing Subsidy Programs by Type

Characteristics	SECTION 8 Vouchers		Public Housing	LIHTC ⁶
	Project-based	Tenant-based		
Type of housing	Typical: units set aside in existing private complex OR rehabilitated units that meet PHA requirements.	Any type of privately owned rental housing.	Broad: from single family homes to highrise apartments for elderly, etc.	All types.
Who	Any eligible family on PHA waiting list.	Ditto (plus any who meet the criteria of the special vouchers named above.)	Low income families, elderly, disabled	Tax credits given to owners to ensure low-income units available; must devote certain percent to eligible households.
Scope	PHA can use up to 20% of its voucher allocation for project-based vouchers.	The remaining 80% of their voucher allocation?	1.3 millions households, 3,300 PHAs	Very, very large.

children with their families. May also be used to lease or purchase decent, safe and sanitary affordable housing in the private housing market.

¹⁰ *Conversion Vouchers* are for families dislocated by the demolition, disposition or mandatory conversion of public housing units. Also used where landlords cancel contracts with PHA (or vice versa) or where landlord is prepaying the mortgage.

¹¹ *Designated Housing Vouchers* serve non-elderly families with a disabled person who would be eligible for public housing if it were not restricted to the elderly

¹² *Certain Development Vouchers* serve non-elderly families with a disabled person who would be eligible for private housing if the owner did not prefer or restrict it to the elderly families.

Appendix D: Housing Subsidy Question History

Table D1: Housing Subsidy Question History			
	AHS Original	ORCM Recommendation	SRD Test
HCST12a (RENEW)	1. As part of your rental agreement, do you need to answer questions about your income whenever your lease is up for renewal? (Y/N)	1. Each year, as part of your rental agreement, is your household required to complete recertification by reporting income or who lives with you to determine the amount of rent you pay? (Y/N)	1. Each year, as part of your rental agreement, is your household required to complete recertification by reporting income AND who lives with you to determine the amount of rent you pay? (Y/N/DK)
HCST12b (REPHA)	2. To whom do you report your income? (1) A building manager or landlord? (2) A public housing authority or a state or local housing agency? (3) Or someone else? Specify.	(Included in test but not recommendations.)	(Derived from probes in Pretest Protocol.)
HCST12c (SUBRNT)	3. Do you pay a lower rent because the government is paying part of the cost of the unit? (Y/N/DK)	2. Is your rent amount lower because you are in either a Federal, State, or local government-housing program? (Y/N)	2. Does your household pay a lower rent because it receives a rental subsidy? (Y/N/DK)
HCST12d (PROJ)	4. Is the building owned by a Public Housing Authority? (Y/N/DK)	3. Is the housing authority your landlord? (Y/N)	3. Is the housing authority your landlord? (Y/N/DK)
HCST12e (APPLY)	5. How did you come to live here? Did you apply to management here, or did an agency, such as Public Housing Authority, assign this address to you? (1) Applied (2) Assigned to address	4. Did a housing authority assign this apartment or building to your household? (1) Assigned to a specific apartment or building. (2) Not assigned.	4. Was your household assigned to this specific apartment or building, or were you allowed to choose it yourself? (1) Assigned (2) Allowed to choose
HCST12f (VCHER)	6. Did a Public Housing Authority or some other similar agency give you a CERTIFICATE or VOUCHER to help pay for this units? (Y/N)	5. Does your household have a housing voucher that allows you to choose where you live and pays for the rent? (Y/N)	5. A housing voucher gives a renter the right to choose where they live AND it helps pay for the rent. Does your household have a housing voucher? (Y/N/DK)
NEW		6. Can you use your housing voucher to move to another location? (Y/N)	6. Can your household use its housing voucher to move to another location? (Y/N/DK)
HCST12g (RCNTRL)	7. Does the government limit the rent on the unit through rent control or rent stabilization? (Y/N)	(Not included)	7. Does the government limit the rent on the unit through rent control or rent stabilization? (Y/N/DK)

