

# WHAT DO HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHER HOLDERS WANT? UNDERSTANDING RESIDENTIAL PREFERENCES AND EXPERIENCES

Executive Summary April 2026



The Met Council's mission is to foster efficient and economic growth for a prosperous metropolitan region.

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The Metropolitan Council is the regional planning organization for the seven-county Twin Cities area. The Met Council operates the regional bus and rail system, collects and treats wastewater, coordinates regional water resources, plans and helps fund regional parks, and administers federal funds that provide housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income individuals and families. The 17-member Council board is appointed by and serves at the pleasure of the governor.

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## To serve people with Housing Choice Vouchers, we need to understand what they want

The Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program is one of the main sources of housing assistance for low-income renters. People with a voucher can find any unit to rent, with rent capped at 30% of their monthly income; the rest is paid for by federal subsidies. The program's goal is to expand housing options for low-income renters who would otherwise be more constrained by their limited budget.

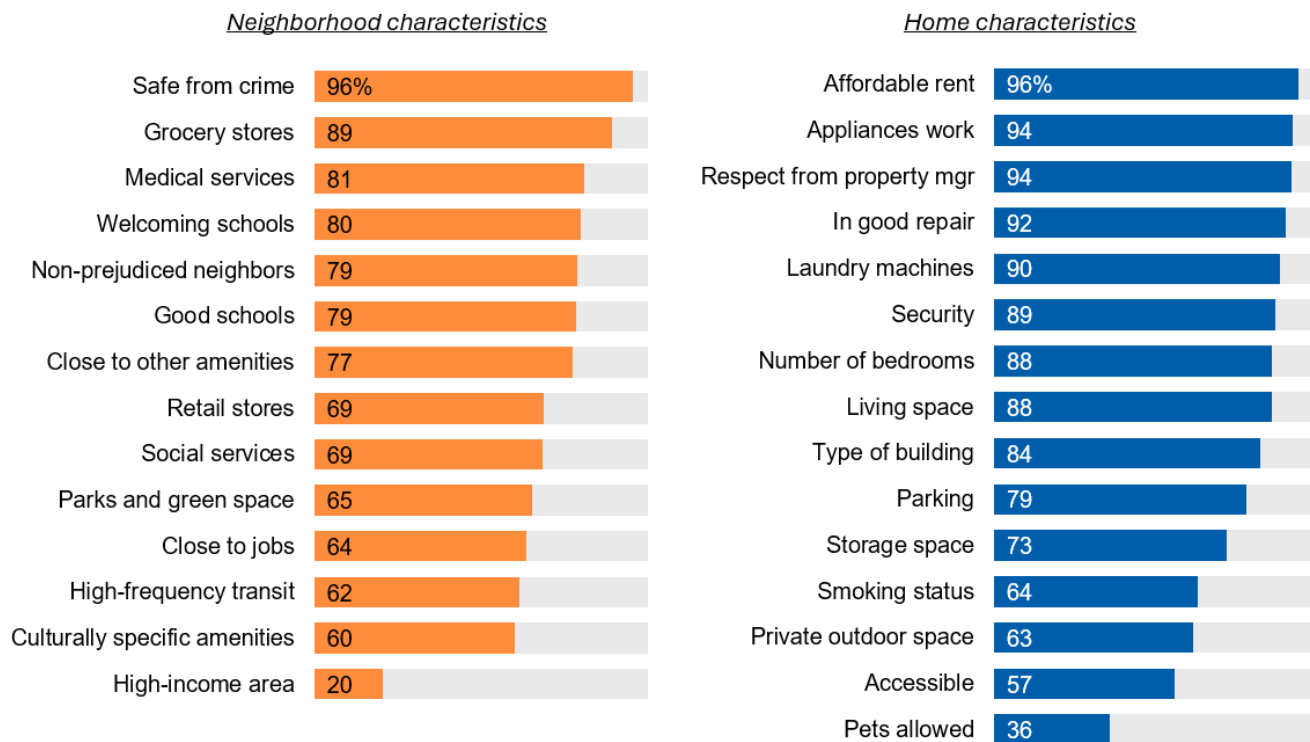
Vouchers are intended to improve the lives of low-income renters. Broadly speaking, there are two views of how to do this. In a “place-centered” view, voucher holders are best served by living in “opportunity areas” – designated neighborhoods that are seen as optimal for children's long-term economic outcomes – so the goal is to help them move to these places. In a “people-centered” view, different people want different things, so the goal is to make sure they can meet their needs as they define them. This may or may not involve a move to an opportunity area; to serve voucher holders best, we need to understand what they want in the first place.

In this study, we used this people-centered lens to examine the housing and neighborhood preferences, outcomes, and satisfaction of households who receive HCV assistance. We sent surveys to a random sample of voucher holders living in Minneapolis and surrounding counties. The survey included both closed-ended questions (like rating the importance of various characteristics on a five-point scale) and open-ended questions (like describing what they like or dislike about their living situation). This enabled a mixed-method analysis that understands voucher holders' situations in their own words while using statistical techniques to generalize to all voucher holders.

## Voucher holders generally prioritize homes over neighborhoods, but their needs are diverse

When voucher holders rated the importance of 14 neighborhood characteristics and 15 home characteristics, they said that most of these items were “very important” or “extremely important.” The most important neighborhood characteristics were safety, grocery stores, and medical services; the most important home characteristics were affordable rent, good physical condition, and space.

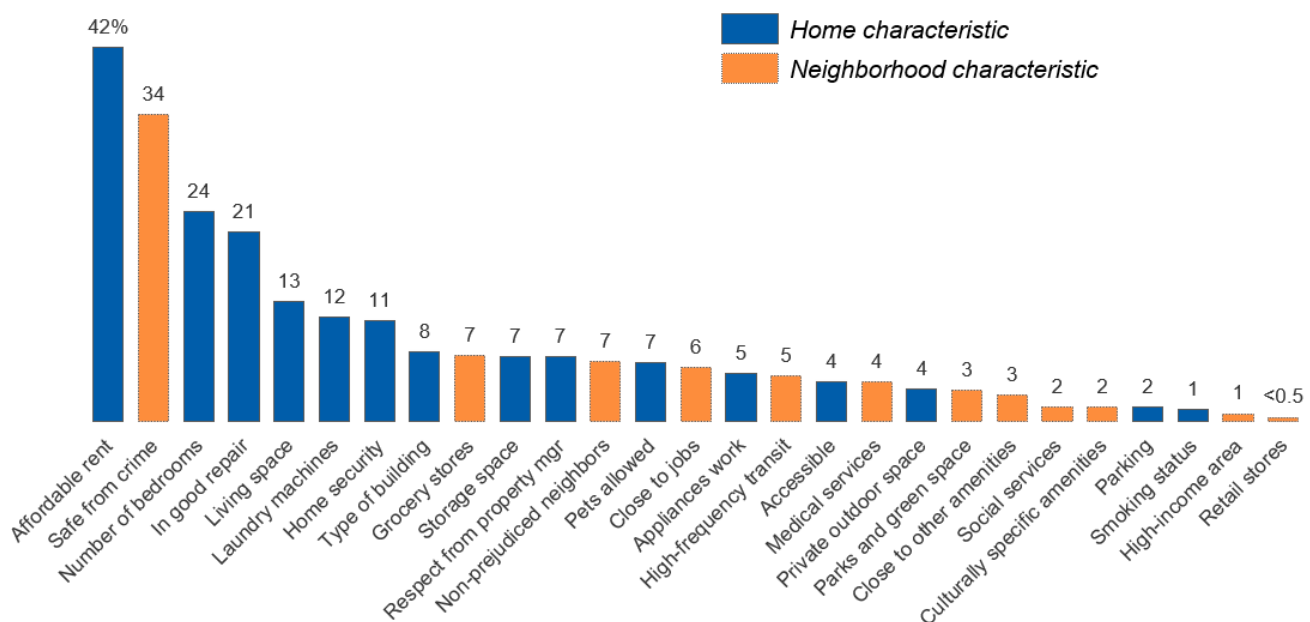
### Share of voucher holders rating each of the following neighborhood/home characteristics as “very important” or “extremely important”



Source: Metropolitan Council survey of Housing Choice Voucher holders

In real housing searches, though, voucher holders cannot get everything they want and face difficult tradeoffs. When they were asked to pick the three most important characteristics of homes or neighborhoods, voucher holders were more likely to choose home characteristics. Among the seven items chosen by at least 10% of voucher holders, only one – safety from crime – is a neighborhood characteristic. The rest – affordable rent, number of bedrooms, good repair, living space, laundry machines, and home security – are characteristics of homes.

## Share of voucher holders selecting each item as one of their three most important characteristics overall



Source: Metropolitan Council survey of Housing Choice Voucher holders

That said: while it may be tempting to overlook the other characteristics, it is important to note that most of them were selected by a non-trivial share of voucher holders. Consider accessibility and whether pets are allowed, which received some of the lowest general importance ratings in the previous figure. Here, they are in the middle of the pack: while a minority of voucher holders have a disability and/or pets, those who do are very focused on those features of homes. There simply is no consensus about the most important characteristics; different voucher holders want different things, and a focus on moves to “opportunity areas” will not serve them adequately.

## Voucher holders can find what they’re looking for, but their housing searches are often difficult

Understanding what voucher holders want is helpful, but we also need to understand whether they are able to get it. While others have tried to answer this question by examining the characteristics of voucher holders’ homes and neighborhoods, we are more interested in voucher holders’ own perspectives: if someone feels unsafe in their neighborhood, we should not discount that simply because other data sources indicate that the crime rate is relatively low.

When voucher holders answered for themselves, 80% of them said they were able to find some, most, or all of what they were looking for in a neighborhood, and even more (86%) said they found at least some of what they wanted in a home. But about four-fifths of those who said they found things they wanted also said that it was at least somewhat difficult.

**80%** said they were able to find at least some of what they wanted in a neighborhood...

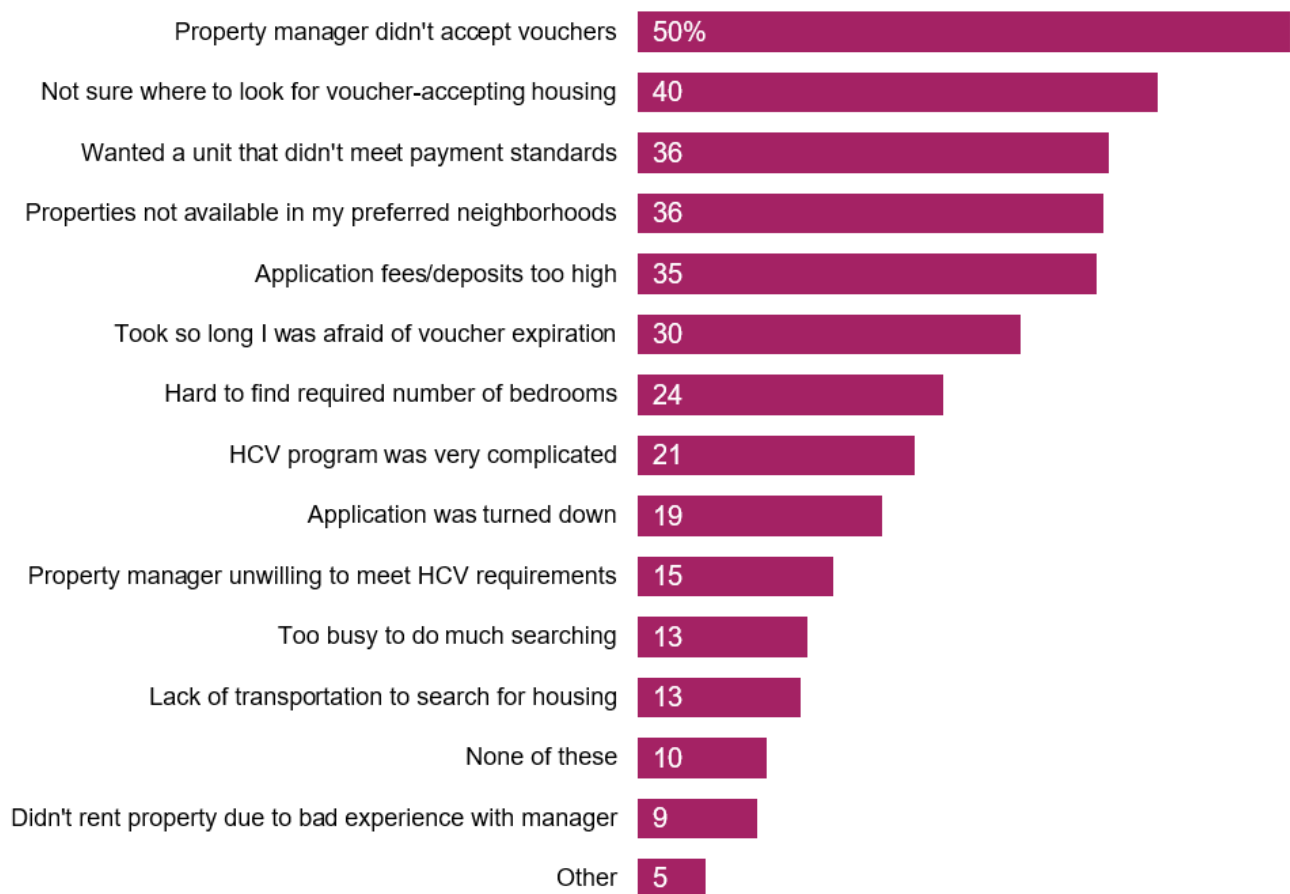
... but **78%** of them reported some difficulty

**86%** said they were able to find at least some of what they wanted in a home...

... but **84%** of them reported some difficulty

When voucher holders were asked what made their housing searches difficult, half of them reported contacting a property manager who turned out not to accept vouchers. About 40% said they weren't sure where to look for properties that would accept vouchers, and more than one-third of respondents said that nothing was available in a preferred neighborhood, application fees and deposits were too high, or a unit they wanted didn't meet the payment standards (the limits housing authorities set on how much rent they will subsidize).

### Share of voucher holders who experienced each of the following barriers during their most recent housing search



Source: Metropolitan Council survey of Housing Choice Voucher holders

## Most voucher holders are generally satisfied

Ultimately, the most important measure of success in the HCV program is whether voucher holders are satisfied with neighborhoods and homes – and most are. For both neighborhoods and homes, about two-thirds of voucher holders said they were somewhat happy or extremely happy with their living situation.

Somali voucher holders were much more satisfied than members of other groups, perhaps because they are evaluating their current situations against difficult and traumatic circumstances earlier in their lives.

We also observed that Metro HRA residents and those with a vehicle were happier with their neighborhoods than Minneapolis residents and those without a vehicle respectively. These groups were also more likely to report feeling safe from crime in their neighborhoods, and their home satisfaction was not statistically different, so this pattern probably has much to do with feelings of safety.

**64% overall were happy with their neighborhood**

- **Race difference:** Somali voucher holders more satisfied than other groups (90% vs 55%-63%)
- **Agency difference:** Metro HRA residents more satisfied than Minneapolis residents (71% vs 57%)
- **Vehicle access difference:** Voucher holders with a vehicle more satisfied than those without (71% vs 54%)

**65% overall were happy with their home**

- **Race difference:** Somali voucher holders more satisfied than other groups (89% vs 56%-67%)

Source: Metropolitan Council survey of Housing Choice Voucher holders

## Voucher holders' feelings of satisfaction are nuanced

Voucher holders also described why they were happy or unhappy with their living situation. These were stories told in respondents' own words, independently of the categories and characteristics used elsewhere in the survey. Most respondents expressed both likes and dislikes about their living situations; this shows how voucher holders face complex considerations and tradeoffs in navigating towards the best housing outcome. Moreover, voucher holders do not always evaluate their overall satisfaction by categorizing neighborhood versus home characteristics. They often evaluate satisfaction with a myriad of overlapping, personal, and environmental factors, and draw less of a distinction between neighborhood and home characteristics than policymakers do.

Voucher holders' overall satisfaction was most strongly influenced by the quality and condition of their housing unit, property management practices, and neighborhood safety and amenities. Importantly, their desire for safety is multifaceted, not just about crime and violence. They also value "peace and quiet," the absence of traffic and environmental hazards, good neighbors, and the general physical condition of their neighborhoods.

### Major influences on voucher holders' satisfaction levels

|                            | Neighborhood characteristics                                                                               | Home characteristics                                                                 |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sources of satisfaction    | Proximity to amenities (148 mentions)<br>Safety/peace and quiet (140)<br>Relationships with neighbors (80) | Quality of unit (140 mentions)<br>Enough space (36)<br>Good property management (35) |
| Sources of dissatisfaction | Unsafe area (107)<br>Unpleasant neighbors (21)                                                             | Poor property management (63)<br>Poor maintenance/upkeep (38)<br>Too small (35)      |

Voucher holders' stories also revealed how their social identities and relationships influenced their satisfaction. In particular, those with children often discussed concerns with neighborhood safety as well as the number of bedrooms and overall space in their home. Voucher holders with disabilities mentioned elevators in their buildings and in-unit laundry facilities as important factors in their satisfaction.

| Voucher holders describe their neighborhoods                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>"[My neighborhood] is close to a park that I can walk to or hang out with my neighbors in. It is also close [to] my favorite mosque, which I go to every day."</i>                                                                                                                 |
| <i>"The environment here feels safer for my family, especially for having an infant to raise. This neighborhood is quieter, more secluded and less hustle and bustle coming from a main street."</i>                                                                                  |
| <i>"I love the east side of St. Paul and it has been my home since childhood. Lots of history and access to everything."</i>                                                                                                                                                          |
| <i>"It's a really nice and mostly safe neighborhood with good schools, parks, and lots of things to do nearby. It's also fairly diverse."</i>                                                                                                                                         |
| <i>"One neighbor is very rude and I feel [they are] racist."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>"My current neighborhood it's OK, but it's still not accessible for people with handicaps especially getting to public transportation and so forth like the neighborhood stores."</i>                                                                                              |
| <i>"Someone shot at my 17-year-old son trying to steal his car. Teens smoke in the stairwell and it always smells like weed when I go out to walk my dog. Sometimes homeless people get into the building and sleep in random places. I've also seen human poop on the stairway."</i> |

## Voucher holders describe their homes

*“Management is very professional, Maintenance most times handles work orders next business day, I have great neighbors in this building. I feel lucky to live in this complex, my living situation is in the top 5% best living situations for anyone at my socioeconomic level.”*

*“There are no rodents or bugs. It appears that considering the challenges, management here really tries to make my place of residence decent for all tenants.”*

*“Very nice fit for my family. Lots of space and well-kept. Spacious and comfortable.”*

*“We need more space since my kids are getting older... The oldest being a teen boy, he especially needs his own room from his younger sister, a pre-teen, and little brother. It would be nice to have a big enough space to accommodate our growing needs, including me being an aspiring entrepreneur.”*

*“This home is very out of date. Nothing works, they won’t fix anything, it takes them months to fix things, they barely give notice. The washer and dryers do not work; they will be down for weeks.”*

*“Management keeps increasing my rent every year. I feel the company that owns the apartment building cares more about profit than improving the resident experience. The staff is rarely here.”*

## Direct assistance, information, and policy changes can help voucher holders meet their needs

While two-thirds of voucher holders are generally satisfied, we still need to pay attention to the one-third of them who are unhappy (or not sure how satisfied they are). On the basis of this research, the following would help:

- More targeted assistance to voucher holders. In our survey, about three-fifths of voucher holders said that resources for finding properties that accept vouchers and financial help with application fees and deposits would be helpful.
- Information that empowers voucher holders. Given the value they place on so many home and neighborhood characteristics, tools to explore potential places and properties could be useful. And an interactive calculator showing how much they would pay to rent a given home might be especially helpful, considering how important affordable rent is and the complex formulas for determining voucher holders’ housing costs. One-third of voucher holders in our survey said that this would be useful.
- Systemic change is needed when half of voucher holders report encountering property managers who do not rent to voucher holders. Housing authorities could expand outreach to bring more landlords into the program. Local governments could also play an important role, given their ability to issue rental licenses as well as pass (and enforce) ordinances that prohibit discrimination against voucher holders.

Beyond these specific efforts, adopting a people-centered lens that privileges voucher holders’ voices can generate additional input and ideas. Our research has demonstrated that different voucher holders want different things; a “one-size-fits-all” approach like encouraging them to move to “opportunity areas” will not serve them adequately.



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