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Recipients of federal housing vouchers, many of them African-American, who in recent years have moved to Antioch, Calif., accuse the city's police officers of harassment in a lawsuit filed last month.

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As Program Moves Poor to Suburbs, Tensions Follow

By [SOLOMON MOORE](#)

ANTIOCH, Calif. — From the tough streets of Oakland, where so many of Alice Payne's relatives and friends had been shot to death, the newspaper advertisement for a federally assisted rental property in this Northern California suburb was like a bridge across the River Jordan.

Ms. Payne, a 42-year-old African-American mother of five, moved to Antioch in 2006. With the local real estate market slowing and a housing voucher covering two-thirds of the rent, she found she could afford a large, new home, with a pool, for \$2,200 a month.

But old problems persisted. When her estranged husband was arrested, the local housing authority tried to cut off her subsidy, citing disturbances at her house. Then the police threatened to prosecute her landlord for any criminal activity or public nuisances caused by the family. The landlord forced the Paynes to leave when their lease was up.

Under the Section 8 federal housing voucher program, thousands of poor, urban and often African-American residents have left hardscrabble neighborhoods in the nation's largest cities and resettled in the suburbs.



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Darrell Turner of the N.A.A.C.P. talked to a private security guard who had stopped black teenagers on the block.

Law enforcement experts and housing researchers argue that rising crime rates follow Section 8 recipients to their new homes, while other experts discount any direct link. But there is little doubt that cultural shock waves have followed the migration. Social and racial tensions between newcomers and their neighbors have increased, forcing suburban communities like Antioch to re-evaluate their civic identities along with their methods of dealing with the new residents.

The foreclosure crisis gnawing away at overbuilt suburbs has accelerated that migration, and the problems. Antioch is one of many suburbs in the midst of a full-blown mortgage meltdown that has seen property owners seeking out low-income renters to fill vacant homes. The most recent Contra Costa County records available show that from 2003 to 2005, the number of Section 8 households in Antioch grew by 50 percent, to about 1,500 from 1,000. Many new residents are African-American; Antioch's black population has grown to about 20 percent, from 3 percent in 1990.

Federally assisted tenants in Antioch brought a class action lawsuit against the police department last month, claiming racial discrimination, intimidation and illegal property searches. The lawsuit, which was filed in the Northern District of [California](#), claims that the police routinely questioned Section 8 residents about their housing status and wrote letters to the county's housing authority recommending termination of subsidies. They say the police also threatened Section 8 landlords for infractions by tenants. A December 2007 study of Antioch police records by Public Advocates, a law firm in San Francisco, counted 67 investigations of black households, compared with 59 of white families; black households, it found, are four times as likely to be searched based on noncriminal complaints and to be contacted by the police in the first place.

Chief James Hyde of the Antioch Police Department denied that his officers routinely asked whether tenants were Section 8 recipients and said that the police department did not have information about which homes were on federal assistance. But Chief Hyde also said that the local housing authority was not meeting its obligation to screen tenants properly, and that as his department focused on nuisance issues, the police had become a de facto enforcement arm of the federal government.

“Other cities have come asking us for guidance,” Chief Hyde said.

The Section 8 program is designed to encourage low-income tenants to settle in middle-income areas by subsidizing 60 percent of their rent. The United States [Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) issued 50,000 more vouchers for suburban relocations in 2007 than in 2005, bringing the total number of renter families to 2.1 million.

Federal officials and housing experts say that the increase in vouchers was offset by people being forced out of federal housing projects that closed and by renters moving into foreclosed properties. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, a nonprofit advocacy and research group, 30 percent to 40 percent of residents in foreclosed properties were renters, many of whom have since sought federal assistance.

Linda Couch, the coalition's deputy director, said families often waited a decade or more for housing vouchers.

Demand for subsidized suburban housing, meanwhile, is outstripping supply. In Salinas, Calif., applicants circled an entire block around a housing authority office earlier this month. Mobile, Ala., has 3,400 Section 8 families, and 2,000 more awaiting homes.

Sociologists have long claimed that leaving behind high-crime, low-employment neighborhoods for the middle-class suburbs buoys the fortunes of impoverished tenants. An article in the July/August edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*, however, cited findings by researchers at the [University of Memphis](#) that crime in Memphis appeared to migrate with voucher recipients. More broadly, a 2006 [Georgia Institute of Technology](#) study found that every time a neighborhood experienced three foreclosures per 100 owner-occupied properties in a year, violent crime increased by approximately 7 percent.

As Antioch's population grew to 101,000 in 2005, from 73,386 in 1995, the city built about 4,000 housing units in the early years of this decade.

Now it has one of the highest foreclosure rates in the state, with about 23 of every 1,000 homeowners losing their homes as of June, according to DataQuick, a real estate information clearinghouse.

While total crime in Antioch declined by 15 percent in the first three months of this year, compared to the same period in 2007, violent crime increased by about 16 percent, according to city statistics. Robberies and assaults accounted for most of that rise.

In an incident report filed with the Antioch Police Department, Natalie and Darin Rouse complained of constant problems with gang members' blaring car stereos and under-age drinking on the street. In a written account, they blamed "gross community overdevelopment, affirmative action loopholes and incompetent state government management of federal affordable housing programs" for the problems.

Several white women, all professionals who attend the same church and have lived in Antioch for 12 years or more, recently sat outside a Starbucks coffee shop and discussed how their declining home equity had trapped them in a city they no longer recognize.

"My father got held up at gunpoint while he was renting a car to a young African-American man," said Rebecca Gustafson, 35, who owns a graphics and Web design company with her husband. Ms. Gustafson said her car had also been broken into three times before being stolen from her driveway.

Laura Reynolds, 36, an emergency room nurse, said that she often came home to her Country Hills development tract after working a late-shift to find young black teenagers strolling through her neighborhood.

"I know it sounds horrible, but they're scary. I'm sorry," said Ms. Reynolds, who like her two friends said she was conflicted about her newfound fear of black youths. "Sometimes I question myself, and I think, Would I feel this way if they were Mexican or white?"

Housing advocates argue that the impact of Section 8 in Antioch and other communities is exaggerated and that Section 8 houses make up only a small amount of the real estate market. Section 8 homes rarely exceed more than 2 percent of available housing in any metropolitan area; in Antioch the average is 8 percent, according to housing officials.

Brad Seligman, a lawyer with the Impact Fund, a nonprofit civil rights advocacy group based in San Francisco that is representing Section 8 tenants in Antioch, along with groups like the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) and Public Advocates, accused the city's police department of racially profiling black subsidized tenants. The [N.A.A.C.P.](#) has made similar accusations.

"Instead of driving while black, it's renting while black," Mr. Seligman said.



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Alice Payne had to leave her Antioch home, where federal vouchers subsidized the rent.

Thomas and Karen Coleman and their three children were the only black family on their street when they moved to Antioch in 2003 with a housing voucher.

In June 2007, a neighbor told the police that Mr. Coleman had threatened him. Officers from the police community action team visited the house and demanded to be allowed in.

“I cracked the door open, but they pushed me out of the way,” Ms. Coleman said.

The officers searched the house even though they did not have a warrant, said the Colemans, who are now part of the class-action suit against the department. The police questioned Mr. Coleman, a parolee at the time, about his living arrangement. He explained that he and his wife were separated but in the process of reconciling. The police accused the family of violating a Section 8 rule that only listed tenants can live in a subsidized home.

After the raid, officers made repeated visits to the Coleman home and to Mr. Coleman’s job at a movie theater. They also sent a letter to the county housing department

recommending that the Colemans be removed from federal housing assistance, a recommendation the authority rejected.

“They kept harassing me until I was off parole,” Mr. Coleman said.