



# Landlord Interview: Thematic Protocol

MTW4 Evaluation: Landlord Incentives

Last Modified: October 5, 2022

## Introduction to Protocol for Reviewers

The thematic landlord protocol is structured as a guide for the interviewer to follow a particular approach to interviewing. Interviews proceed in a conversational manner, which means that interviewees often end up providing answers to one question that also provide information related to later questions in the protocol. The interviewer guides the conversation using questions in the protocol and probes on relevant details of interest to the study. As a result, while we have structured the guide in a particular order and format, the interview itself may follow a different path as the interviewee and interviewer together construct the flow and format. It is also possible that portions of the guide will not be relevant to particular respondents. Interviewers should not make *a priori* assumptions but will be trained in how to skip sections should they prove irrelevant.

The protocol exists to remind the interviewer about key topics to cover along with relevant details to explore in depth. Interviews will vary in length according to the information the interviewee has to share. Some interviewees will have very limited knowledge of a topic or may be particularly concise in their talking style. Those interviews will tend to be shorter than 60 minutes. Other interviewees will have a lot of experience with the Housing Choice Voucher program and will as a result have a lot of information to share. Those interviews may last for up to 90 minutes. The minutes estimated for each section currently adds up to more than 60 minutes. Across all of the interviews we expect to maintain an average interview length of 60 minutes. Interviewers will be trained to make trade-offs and prioritize some questions over others during the interview in order to manage the interview timing.

The protocol is structured to allow the interviewer to gather rich contextual data about the interviewee and their experiences before diving into specific details related to the housing choice vouchers and landlord incentive experience. Questions are included that elicit specific detailed examples, and the interviewer will be trained to ask for concrete examples. Grounding the interview in detailed examples increases the validity and quality of the data. Reporting on specific behaviors will allow the analysis team to observe and triangulate within the interview any reported changes in behavior as a result of the landlord incentives. Additionally, detailed specific stories provide appropriate context for understanding the larger framework within which the landlord is making decisions.

The following interview protocol will be piloted and adjusted accordingly to eliminate any questions which do not yield useful information. Interviewers will be trained to keep a core focus on the goals of the interview and manage the interview time accordingly.

## Paperwork Reduction Act – Burden Statement

Public Reporting Burden for this information collection is estimated to average 60 minutes per respondent, including time to review the information in the Study Overview. The MTW Evaluation: Landlord Incentives is a study of the implementation and impacts of providing selected incentives to landlords to participate in the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program. This information is being collected to document landlord perceptions of PHA activities that could affect landlord participation in the HCV program. Respondents are not required to respond. The information requested is protected and held confidential in accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552a (Privacy Act of 1974) and OMB Circular No. A-130.

## Study Overview and Verbal Informed Consent (10 min)

*(Read to all respondents)*

Thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. My name is [insert name], and I am a researcher from Abt Associates. We are working with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development on a study about the Housing Choice Voucher program. As part of that study, we are talking with landlords all over the country to learn what it is like to own or manage rental properties and what your experience has been renting to people with housing vouchers. We think it is important to talk to landlords and property managers because your experience providing rental housing will help us understand more about the challenges, concerns, and context of renting, particularly to voucher holders. We want to learn all about your work and how you make decisions about your business and investments. We may also want to follow up with you at a later date to learn about how things have changed.

We will keep everything you tell us completely private. We will not share these conversations with anyone outside of our research team. We will not share the data with the Public Housing Authority or link your name with any quotes we may use in our reports. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you don't have to answer any question you don't want to and you can quit at any time.

We ask people to choose a fake name that we can use for your stories. We'll use this name on the tape. That way your real name will not be attached to any of this information. What name would you like to choose?

To make sure we report what you say correctly and accurately, we would like to record this interview. We can stop or pause the recording at any point at any time you like. No one will hear the recording except for the research team. Would it be okay with you if we record our conversation? Great. Before I turn the recorder on, do you have any questions?

**Do you agree to participate in the conversation today?** *[If participant selects no, terminate the interview.]*

Yes  No

**Is it okay for me to record the conversation?** *[If participant selects no, do not record the conversation; only take verbatim notes.]*

Yes  No

*Make the following statement after you have turned on the tape recorder:* This is [fieldworker name], and I'm chatting with [their pseudonym] [their ID number], on [the date] in [general place interview is held].

## INTRODUCTION TO BUSINESS (10 min.)

Before we get started, we wanted to get a sense of your business [your management portfolio].

1. **Tell me about your work.**
  - a. Are you a landlord, investor, or property manager? What is your primary role? What is your business structure? Do you have partners or employees?
2. **For property managers (non-owners): Tell me about who works here with you. What are their responsibilities?**
  - a. What types of decisions are you able to make? When do you need to check with the owner?
3. **Tell me about the properties you own/manage within [PHA jurisdiction name]?** *[Note: We want a sense of their entire real estate portfolio. For smaller landlords, you will want to talk about each property individually. If that is unreasonable, you should have them talk about the types of properties they own or manage. It can be valuable to get a sense of specific properties of each type that you can refer to later for comparisons. For example, if they have some properties they expect to rent to voucher users and some they do not, some single-family homes and some in multifamily buildings, and properties that are clustered in certain areas. You will come back to these properties repeatedly for examples in later sections. For professional managers, only ask about properties that they manage. Their company may have a larger portfolio about which they will know very little.]*
  - a. Tell me all about the building itself (structure, size, quality, condition, architecture, number of units, needed repairs)
  - b. Tell me all about the location (neighborhood, neighborhood reputation, proximity to amenities, demographics of neighborhood, safety, changes in neighborhood)
  - c. Tell me about the current renter(s) in that property (age, race, gender, family size, income)
  - d. Is there currently a Section 8 voucher holder in that unit/building?
4. **Does the project have any sort of income or rent limits? Does it target a specific population (the elderly, disabled, etc.)?** *[Note: Try to figure out, if possible, whether it's a Low Income Housing Tax Credit Property, Project Based Section 8, or other supply-side subsidy. Owners should know, managers may not.]*
  - a. How does that impact your business? What are the requirements related to *[that subsidy]*.
  - b. Are there other things you do because you're serving that population (for example, social programs, etc.)?
  - c. What are the challenges that come along with [owning/managing] that type of property?
5. **Some landlords tend to do everything themselves, sweat equity, others think it's more efficient to hire people to do particular tasks. How about for you?**

Walk me through how you decide what to do yourself, and what to outsource. Tell me about the last thing you did yourself. Tell me about the last thing you hired someone to do.

Probe Q: Do you employ a manager? Handyman? Real estate agent? How did you find these people?
6. [Even with the help] being a landlord must be a lot of work: Tell me everything you did yesterday. Walk me through a typical day...  
*Probes:* Visiting units, Screening tenants, repairs, eviction, investments.

*If they have a day job:* So you need to juggle your day job on the one hand and all of those responsibilities on the other. How do you make that work?

## TENANT RECRUITMENT & PREFERENCES (10-15 min.)

For all of these, start with a specific case or cases. Then you can inquire if that case is typical and get a broader sense of their strategies.

7. **Tell me about how you marketed your last vacant unit.**
  - a. Explain the benefits of listing there as opposed to [another place].  
I see a lot of advertisements for apartments and everyone seems to have a different strategy for what they put in the ad. How about for this unit?  
Probe Q: What media outlets or networks did you use to advertise the unit?  
Probe Q: Describe how you selected pictures, location, description, keywords.  
Probe Q: Tell me about your experiences working with real estate agents or other folks helping tenants find housing.
8. **So that's how you marketed [the XYZ unit] last time it was vacant, can you tell me how you marketed another unit, let's call it ABC [or another word]? Are there other properties you marketed differently? Walk me through your decision-making process?**  
*Key Probe:* Is this process different for different types of units/properties/neighborhoods?
9. **Going back to unit [your last vacant unit], what level of response did you get from your advertisement?**  
Describe the people who inquired about the advertisement (age, race, income, family size).  
  
*Probes:* Number of calls, number of visits within what time frame? How long did it take to fill the unit? How long was the unit vacant?
10. **Tell me about the tenant who ended up getting [your last vacant unit].**  
How and why did you select them?  
  
What were you looking for in the ideal tenant?  
  
Tell me about the process. What types of background checks did you do (credit, rental history, income, criminal history)? What tools did you use to conduct the checks?  
  
*Note:* Get clarity on the actual checks. A lot of landlords use vague language like "background check." Also note if there are parts of these checks they pay more or less attention too.
11. **Tell me about the tenant(s) who applied but did not get unit XYZ last time it was vacant. Why?**
12. **Tell me about screening more generally... What is your standard process for screening tenants?**  
*Probes:* application fees, first come first serve, credit checks, criminal checks, rental history, visiting their current apartments, landlord references.  
  
*Key Probe:* Tell me how this process is different for different types of units/properties/neighborhoods.
13. **Some landlords tell us that they can tell everything about a person just by talking to them. Others say that you need to go through all the formal checks. How about for you?**

**14. Tell me about the unit that you have had the hardest time finding a tenant for. Tell me the whole story.**

*Key Probes:* Are some neighborhoods harder than others? Certain types of properties?

*Key Probes:* Did you consider listing the unit for voucher holders [if not already].

**15. Describe your ideal tenant for unit ABC. [repeat for a second unit] What are your “red flags?”**

## **SUBSIDIZED HOUSING PROGRAMS (15 min.)**

*[Note: this is **not** the time to probe on the landlord incentives. If they come up, then pursue them in detail, but this section is designed to learn about the program generally.]*

**1. Tell me about your experience with the Housing Choice Voucher or Section 8 programs?** *[Note: You may know whether they accept vouchers (from listing) but ask this question broadly regardless. This question will help you determine their level of involvement in the HCV program and place them into one of three categories 1) landlords who actively recruit HCV tenants for some of their units; 2) landlords who are indifferent to the program; 3) landlords who reject the program.]*

*Have you ever rented to a voucher holding tenant? (If yes, answer questions 2-14. If no, skip to question 15.)*

**2. Tell me about the logistics of renting to a tenant with a voucher? Tell me about the specific rules and regulations that make these tenants different from market rate tenants.** *[Play dumb. Ask this question regardless of whether or not they participate in the voucher program.]*

*How does the program set rent limits? For particular areas? For particular units?*

*Walk me through the process and how it is different from market tenants.*

*How and when are you paid? What if a tenant doesn't pay their portion?*

*Which PHA do you accept vouchers from?*

*[If the landlord accepts vouchers from more than one PHA] Are there things one PHA does that is different from another PHA?*

**3. Tell me about the PHA staff who you've interacted with.**

*Who are your contact people when you have a question and a problem?*

*Are there particular folks there who are a pleasure to work with? Tell me that story.*

*Tell me about a customer service experience that made you frustrated.*

**4. Tell me the story of your last voucher inspection, including the good, the bad, and the ugly.**

*Tell me about the timeline for an inspection. What if the unit doesn't pass the first inspection?*

*What did you do to prepare for the inspection?*

*What sorts of things have you needed to repair because of the inspection?*

*Was the inspectors fair? Did you know them?*

**5. Tell me about Section 8 tenants. How are they different from market rate tenants?**

*Probe: How does it impact repairs and maintenance?*

*Probe: How does it impact length of tenure?*

**6. Did you advertise specifically to voucher holders for unit ABC (pick a unit from above with a subsidized tenant)? Tell me more about that. Why does having a voucher holder in unit ABC make sense?**

*Probe:* Sources to market to voucher holders.

*Key Probe:* Does your marketing to Section 8 or market tenants vary between your different properties? *Probe:* location, neighborhood, stock, condition

**7. What do you do differently when marketing to voucher holders? What types of characteristics make a unit attractive to voucher holders?**

*Probe:* What about the physical unit? Do you do certain types of renovations if you're targeting voucher holders?

**8. Tell me about the kinds of things you can do to a property to get higher rents from the voucher program?**

*Probe:* What sorts of units have rents closer or above the payment standard.

**9. Tell me about the advantages and disadvantages of renting to voucher holders.**

*No matter what they do, try to get them to articulate the advantages and disadvantages.*

*Probe:* Assurance that you will get the rent on time, government intervention, tenants, bureaucracy, inspections

**10. [If not covered already] Are there some units you prefer to rent to Section 8 families? How do you decide?**

*Probe:* Neighborhood, unit quality, rents.

**11. [If they own multi-unit properties] Sometimes landlords tell us that having one unit rented to voucher holders makes it harder to rent the other units in the building to market tenants. Tell me about your experience.**

**12. How does your screening process vary based on whether or not the household has a voucher? Are there different techniques that make sense for different groups?**

[IF THEY SAY THEY HAVE NEVER RENTED TO A VOUCHER HOUSEHOLD]

**13. You said you've never rented to a household with a voucher ...**

*There will be major differences between those who don't participate because it's never been an issue (their rents are too high for example) and those that don't participate because they don't want to.*

**134a. Have you ever been approached by a household with a voucher? Tell me about the last time and your decision not to participate in the program.**

*Probe:* How did they contact you?

*Probe:* At what stage did you realize they had a voucher?

*Probe:* What other qualities/deficits did they have?

*Probe:* Describe your decision-making process.

**134b. Do you have any associates, friends or colleagues who rent or have rented to voucher holders? Tell me what stories they have told you.**



**134c. [If non-participation is enthusiastic]: What would need to change about the program to get you to participate?**

*Whatever they state in answer to this question, you should work to get the details of their concern.*

*If the issue is practical (the paperwork takes too long), make sure you understand what they're basing that assessment on. What experience do they have with the issue?*

*If the issue is ideological (e.g. vouchers breed dependency), discuss it with them generally. Good, non-combative, probes for ideologies are as follows:*

That's really interesting, tell me more about that idea.

You know, I've heard a lot of folks mention that. What makes that idea so important for you personally?

## **LANDLORD INCENTIVES (15 min.)**

*[Note: It is likely that some of these will have come up earlier, but if they haven't, we want the landlords' thoughts on each in turn.*

*You will know, in advance, which of these were implemented by the PHA and which were not (in comparison sites, perhaps none will be). If the PHA has implemented the program, ask the following battery of questions for each incentive prior to the specific probes described below:*

### **[INSERT LIST OF PHA INCENTIVES]**

**1. We understand that [PHA] has a program related to [the incentive]. Have you heard of it?**

*[If they claim to have heard of it ask questions 2 through 5]*

**2. Tell me how you first heard about [the incentive]?**

PROBES: word of mouth, from PHA, from tenant who applied

**3. How did you react when you first heard about the incentive? What were your first thoughts?**

**4. Some folks have said [the incentive] made them more enthusiastic about the program, while others felt like it wouldn't really change their perspective. How was it for you?**

**4. Were there particular properties in your portfolio that you shifted towards the voucher program? Tell me about why it mattered for those properties in particular.**

**5. Were they new properties you acquired that you rented to HCV families because of the incentive?**

*[If they actually experienced / participated in the incentive ask question 6 and 7]*

**6. Tell me about your experience with [the incentive]. How exactly did it all work?**

**7. What could have made the incentive work better?**

*After you cover each of the incentives that were implemented, you want to have a conversation about some possible incentives. For each of those incentives that were not implemented, ask the following battery of questions (#8-10).*

***[INSERT LIST OF POSSIBLE HUD INCENTIVES NOT IMPLEMENTED BY PHA]***

8. Now I want to talk about proposals that some people suggest would improve the voucher program.
9. Tell me your thoughts about [proposed incentive].
10. I know it's hard to say, but can you think of particular opportunities the [proposed incentive] would create? Can you give me an example of a problem that you've had with the housing choice voucher program that the incentive would solve?

*Each of the batteries below are supplemental to these core questions. It is likely that they will be answered when asking the generic questions. Keep track of which questions are covered and then answer any questions not covered in the interviewee's responses.*

*The general flow of the interview is as follows: You will have a list of incentives [provided as a supplemental document for your reference for each site visit] implemented at the PHA. For each entry on that list, ask the full battery of generic questions and those specific to that incentive. As with any qualitative interview, the order here is not predetermined but should emerge from the respondent. After you have completed the battery of questions for implemented incentives, you should move on to the those that the PHA has not implemented, again mixing the generic questions above with the specific questions below. We anticipate that discussions about the non-implemented incentives will be rather brief.*

**1. Revised Payment Standards (w/ or w/o SAFMR)**

*Note: For the general descriptive question, make sure they describe how the PHA determines rents (ideally both before and after any changes). Does it differ by neighborhood?*

- a. When you rent to a voucher household, how accurately are you able to predict what the rent would be? What are the factors that make for a higher rent determination?
- b. Many landlords talk about how a higher payment standard might make a voucher worth in some units but not in others. What is your perspective on the payment standards across your portfolio?
- c. Tell me about a particular unit (if any) that you acquired for which the new payment standards made it financially feasible.

**2. Vacancy Loss (between or before first)**

*Note: For the general descriptive question, make sure they describe that they believe to be the process for payment during the approval period and/or how landlords can apply for gap payments.*

- a. Sometimes landlords say that they lose rent while they're waiting for a voucher to be approved, or in the time between voucher holders. Has that been your experience? Tell me about a recent example.
- b. Thinking about [particular unit(s)], roughly how long does it usually take between finding a voucher tenant and getting the first rental payment? *[If they participated prior to the incentives]* How has that changed since the incentive?
- c. *[If they took advantage of a gap payment]* When you're looking to replace a voucher tenant with another voucher tenant, how does that shift your marketing strategy? Tell me about the last unit you bridged; how did you market that property?
- d. *[If they took advantage of a gap payment]* Tell me about the applicant pool for [that unit] during turnover. Did any market tenants apply? How did you manage that?

### **3. Damage Claims**

*Note: For the general descriptive question, make sure they describe how they understand the criteria for filing a claim. What requirements must be met; what's the process like? How does it interact with retention of security deposit and/or small claims court.*

- a. *[If they rent to vouchers]* Tell me about a time a voucher holder damaged a unit you own beyond the usual wear and tear. How did you handle that?
- b. *[If participated]* Did you file a claim? Tell me that story.
- c. *[If didn't participate but program was available]* Did you consider filing a claim for damage? Tell me that story. What prevented you?

### **4. Monetary Incentives**

*Note: For the general descriptive questions, make sure they describe the specific amounts of the incentive and the eligibility criteria.*

- a. *[If participated]* Were there particular units that you wouldn't have rented to a voucher holder without this incentive? Describe the sorts of units where the incentive really shifted your thinking.
- b. *[If didn't participate with all units]* Talk to me about the units that the incentive wasn't enough. What was it about them?
- c. *[If didn't participate with all units]* Is there any reasonable incentive that would have shifted your decision on that unit?

### **5. Waiver of Initial Inspection / Pre-Qualifying Unit Inspections / Alternative Inspection Schedule**

*Note: For the general descriptive questions, make sure they describe the standard inspection process, the alternative process, and the criteria all for waiver/pre-qualification/alternative inspections.*

- a. *[If participated]* Talk to me about the most recent inspection you had under the program. Tell me that whole story.
- b. *[If participated]* Were there certain units that it made sense to you to prioritize for the alternative / pre-qualification program? Explain your thinking.
- c. *[If didn't participate / didn't participate in all units]* Tell me about your units that didn't qualify. What was it about those units that made them ineligible / not worth it?
- d. *[If participated]* What strategies do you use to reduce turnover? Did the alternative process shift your approach?

**6. Are there other ways [the PHA] is working with landlords to increase participation? Tell me all the details.**

**7. Tell me about the last time you communicated with the PHA.**

**8. Does the PHA have a landlord advisory group or something similar? Tell me about that? [If they participate, spend more time on this question getting details of who attends, and what they've talked about at the last several meetings.]**

**9. One of the questions we're interested in is how we get the word out about incentives. What would you recommend if we wanted landlords like you to hear about something?**

## VI: The Rental Market (5-10 min)

*[IF RUNNING OUT OF TIME, SKIP THIS SECTION]*

*So we're totally new to the area here, can you help us understand what the rental market looks like in [city]?*

### **1. Tell us about [city's] rental market.**

- a. Do different parts of the city have different rental markets? Who owns what where? Why?
- b. To what degree do the different types of landlords in [location] engage with the voucher program? Tell me about the ones who specialize in the program.

### **2. Where is the rental market most competitive—are there places with few rental units, or very high demand?**

*Key Probe: Where are Section 8 units in the greatest demand?*

### **3. [If owner] In what areas are you considering buying more properties? Why or why not.**

## Closing Questions (5 min)

- 1. If you could provide one recommendation to policy makers that would make you more likely to rent to Housing Choice Voucher holders, what would it be?**

**Thanks so much for everything you've shared today. Is there anything left that you haven't shared so far that you'd like to tell us?**