

## What kinds of residential mobility improve lives?

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### Summary

1. Housing projects create concentrated poverty which causes many kinds of harm.
2. Gautreaux shows that residential mobility targetted to mostly white, affluent suburbs provides access to strong labor markets, good schools, and safety, and mothers and children strongly benefit.
3. Gautreaux families tended to remain in the suburbs; 66% remained after 15 years.
4. Although MTO hoped to replicate Gautreaux, MTO created a very strong study of a very weak version of Gautreaux. In the 1970s, the national housing voucher experiment showed if given vouchers, people choose familiar areas, segregated areas similar to the ones they left. MTO largely did the same thing. Although MTO families moved to low-poverty census tracts, they made short-distance moves, to segregated and economically declining areas, often in segregated enclaves near census-tract boundaries. They also attended terrible schools, often the same schools as previously. The one surprise was that these weak moves reduced depression and obesity for mothers and daughters.
5. After seeing MTO results, no one will implement that exact program again. In retrospect, the program could have led to entirely different placements if it had provided information, advice and assistance about housing location and school choice.
6. Policy Implications: Better-targeted vouchers are necessary if we don't want to merely recreate concentrated poverty enclaves in new places. Programs like Gautreaux, which provide information, active counseling, and housing location help encourage moves that improve racial integration, better neighborhoods, stronger labor markets, and better schools, which are likely to improve the lives of adults and children.

Neighborhood effects on the lives of families and young people have long been an important topic of research. After William J. Wilson convincingly showed the mechanisms by which concentrated poverty causes many kinds of harm to adults and children, the next question was what would happen to families who moved out of these areas? Federal courts are currently considering whether to mandate racial or socioeconomic integration in housing and school settings (*Thompson v. HUD*; *Meredith and Parents* cases). Unfortunately, since poor families are usually trapped in dangerous neighborhoods and their children are trapped in poor schools ([South and Deane 1993](#); [South and Crowder 1997](#); [Massey and Denton 1993](#)), we don't get the chance to observe how a *different* environment might affect their life chances. Moreover, families choose neighborhoods, and the characteristics of families that lead them to choose certain neighborhoods are also likely to affect family and child well-being.

Residential mobility programs, where poor families relocate to [opportunity-rich](#) communities via housing vouchers, provide one way we can begin to separate the effects of family background and neighborhood conditions. However, unrestricted vouchers won't work. In the 1970s, the national housing voucher experiment showed if given vouchers, people choose familiar areas, segregated areas similar to the ones they left (Cronin and Rasmussen, 1981). In this talk, I review one important mobility plan- Chicago's Gautreaux program-and examine a decade of research following the fortunes of the families who moved as a part of this intervention.

## The Gautreaux Program

As a result of a 1976 Supreme Court decision, the Gautreaux program allowed low-income black public housing residents in Chicago to receive Section 8 housing certificates (or vouchers) and move to private-sector apartments either in mostly-white suburbs or within the city. Between 1976 and 1998, over 7000 families participated, and over half moved to suburban communities. Because of its design, the Gautreaux program presents an unusual opportunity: it allows us to examine whether individual outcomes change when low-income black families move to safer neighborhoods with better labor markets and higher quality schools.

Gautreaux participants circumvented the typical barriers to living in suburbs, not by their jobs, finances, or values, but by acceptance into the program and quasi-random assignment to the suburbs. The program provided housing subsidy vouchers and housing support services, but not employment or transportation assistance. Unlike the usual case of working-class blacks living in working-class suburbs, Gautreaux targeted middle- and upper-income white suburbs as the destinations for low-income blacks. Participants moved to more than 115 suburbs throughout the six counties surrounding Chicago. Suburbs with a population that was more than 30% black were excluded by the consent decree. A few very high-rent suburbs were excluded by funding limitations of Section 8 certificates.

## Early Findings

Early research on Gautreaux had shown large and significant relationships between placement neighborhoods and subsequent gains in employment and education. A study of 330 Gautreaux mothers in the early 1990s found that suburban movers had higher employment than city movers, but not higher earnings, and the employment difference was especially large for adults who were unemployed prior to the move (Rosenbaum, 1995). Another study found that, compared with city movers, Gautreaux children who moved to the suburbs were more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, attend four-year colleges (vs. two-year colleges), and if they were not in college, to be employed and to have jobs with better pay and with benefits (Ibid.). These differences were very large, often larger than the effects of education and training programs targeted at these specific outcomes.

Analyses indicated that children moving to suburbs were just as likely to interact with neighbors as city movers, but the suburb movers interacted with white children while city movers interacted mostly with black children. The program seems to have been effective at integrating low-income black children into middle-class white suburbs. Although suburban schools were often far ahead of city schools in terms of curriculum level, mothers reported that suburban teachers often extended extra efforts to help their children catch up with the class. Initial concerns that these children would not be accepted were unsupported by the evidence.

## Recent Research

To improve upon the design and data quality of the earlier work, more recent research used administrative data to locate recent addresses for a 50% random sample of Gautreaux movers who had relocated before 1990, as well as track economic outcomes for mothers. Additionally, multiple census measures were used to characterize neighborhoods and a more comprehensive accounting for pre-program characteristics was employed in the regression models. The use of administrative records permitted us to locate 1504 of 1507 families, and we found that 66% of suburban families remained in the suburbs an average of 15 years after placement. After premove individual and neighborhood attributes were controlled, the racial composition of placement neighborhood predicted racial composition of current neighborhood (DeLuca and Rosenbaum 2003), and mothers continued to live in areas with much lower poverty rates and higher household incomes (Keels et al. 2005).

Individual level economic outcomes, such as welfare receipt, employment, and earnings were also influenced by the income and racial characteristics of placement neighborhoods. Women who moved to mostly white neighborhoods with higher levels of socioeconomic resources did better than their counterparts in areas with low resources and high levels of black residents (Mendenhall, DeLuca, and Duncan 2006). Research on the children of the original Gautreaux families has demonstrated that the neighborhoods where they resided in the late 1990s were substantially more integrated than their overwhelmingly minority origin neighborhoods (Keels 2007a).

### How Did Gautreaux “Work”?

We analyzed interviews with 150 Gautreaux mothers and found that after the move, they described a new sense of efficacy and control over their lives and that the major changes in their environments helped them to see that they had the ability to make improvements in their lives. Certain features of the new suburban neighborhoods changed their perception of what was possible. Specifically, the women reported that they felt better about having an address in the suburbs, and not having to put down a public housing address on job applications. Other women noted that by moving to areas with more white residents, they and their children got to know more white people, and racial stereotypes were debunked. One child whose only exposure to white people were those she saw on TV reported that after moving, she discovered that not all whites looked like TV actors.

Social interactions with whites allowed some of these women to feel that they had more social and cultural know-how and feel much less intimidated by future contexts in which they might have to interact with whites. Additionally, working through some of the initial difficulties of the transitions to the suburbs allowed these women to realize that they could handle manageable challenges along the way to better jobs and more schooling. In comparison, the drugs or gang violence in their old city neighborhoods seemed to be forces too big for them to control and therefore permanent impediments to the advancements they were trying to make in their lives. These findings suggest to us that one's repertoire of capabilities can vary depending on the type of neighborhood one lives

and works in.

### Was Gautreaux a Social Experiment?

The Gautreaux program resembled a quasi-experiment. Families were assigned to conditions in a quasi-random manner, unrelated to their preferences and attributes. In principle, participants had choices about where they moved. In practice, qualifying rental units were secured by rental agents working for the *Gautreaux* program and offered to families according to their position on a waiting list, regardless of their locational preference. Although participants could refuse an offer, few did so, since they were unlikely to ever get another.

As a result, few significant differences were found between suburban and city movers' personal attributes, but premove neighborhood attributes show small, but statistically significant differences on 2 of 9 comparisons. This may indicate selection bias, although random assignment studies [by the HUD-sponsored Moving to Opportunity \(MTO\)](#) also find some substantial differences (Goering and [Feins](#) 2003, Table 7.1). Yet the observed premove differences may not explain much of the outcome difference. For instance, while suburban movers came from *slightly* lower-poverty tracts than city movers (poverty rate of 40.6% vs. 43.8%), they moved to census tracts with *dramatically* lower poverty rates (5.0% vs. 27.3% [DeLuca and Rosenbaum](#) 2003). While small (3 percentage point) differences in initial neighborhoods may account for part of the outcome differences, it is hard to dismiss the possible influence of the enormous differences in placement neighborhoods. Current papers have discussed these issues and examine multiple neighborhood level indicators, detailed preprogram neighborhood differences, and intergenerational effects ([DeLuca and Rosenbaum](#) 2003; [Keels et al.](#) 2005; [Mendenhall, DeLuca, and Duncan](#) 2006; [DeLuca et al.](#) 2007; [Keels](#) 2007a and 2007b).

#### MTO: A strong study of a weak mobility program.

In contrast, MTO was an experiment, with the random assignment of low-income families to three conditions—an experimental group (who moved to low-poverty census tracts), an open-choice Housing Voucher group, and a “no move” control group. MTO was developed to formally test the Gautreaux findings, with more rigorous design, and pre/post move data collection. Unfortunately, while MTO was a stronger study, it was a weaker “neighborhood change treatment.” The Gautreaux program moved families an average of 25 miles away from their original neighborhood, to radically different labor markets, where nearly all children attended schools with above-average achievement and were too far away to interact with prior friends. In comparison, MTO moved most families less than 10 miles away, mostly in the city, most children attended schools with very low achievement (below the 25 percentile nationally), and many children continued interact

In addition, despite wide recognition that spatial mismatch separated low income minorities from the areas of job growth (Holzer, 1991), MTO's short moves did not target job growth areas or put families much closer to such areas, and there were some declines

in the income level of the census tracts they moved to (Orr et al, 2003).

While Gautreaux suburban children attended much better schools and enjoyed improvements in educational outcomes relative to the city movers, the MTO treatment group children attended terrible schools and, not surprisingly, showed no difference in test scores, school dropout, or self reported measures of school engagement compared to the control group an average five years after random assignment (Sanbonmatsu et al. 2006). Indeed, most MTO experimental families sent their children to schools in the same school district (often the same schools), and even when they changed schools, the new schools were not much better than the original schools.

While Gautreaux was associated with gains in mothers' employment, the MTO treatment group showed no impact compared with the control group. However, less noted, the MTO control group had a 100 percent employment gain(Orr, et al., 2003)—an extraordinary. These MTO outcomes were measured in the late 1990s, during a strong labor market and strong welfare reform, so it is possible that every employable person was already doing working, and residential moves had no additional effect for that reason. In addition, there is no indication that the experimental group's short-moves closed the spatial mismatch gap at all.

Nonetheless, both Gautreaux and MTO found large improvements on mothers' and children's feelings of safety. MTO also showed significant reductions in depression and obesity among mothers and daughters (but no difference for sons). Gautreaux studied neither of these outcomes.

Although MTO hoped to replicate Gautreaux, MTO created a very strong study of a very weak version of Gautreaux. As noted, the national housing voucher experiment showed if given vouchers, people choose familiar areas, segregated areas similar to the ones they left. MTO largely did the same thing. Although MTO families moved to low-poverty census tracts, they made short-distance moves, to segregated and economically declining areas, often in segregated enclaves near census-tract boundaries. They also attended terrible schools, often the same schools as previously. The one surprise was that these weak moves reduced depression and obesity for mothers and daughters.

After seeing MTO results, no one will implement that exact program again. In retrospect, the program could have led to entirely different placements if it had provided information, advice and assistance about housing location and school choice.

Policy Implications: Better-targeted vouchers are necessary if we don't want to merely recreate concentrated poverty enclaves in new places. The Gautreaux program was not designed as an experiment, and it lacked the rigorous controls of an experiment. Nonetheless, it provides a study of a strong residential mobility program which was targeted to create moves to more integrated neighborhoods, much better neighborhoods, stronger labor markets, and better schools. MTO provides a stronger study, but a weaker program. In the future, we need strongly targeted programs, like Gautreaux (and perhaps like Baltimore's Thompson program), which provide information, active counseling, and

housing location help which are likely to improve the lives of adults and children.