Connecting Families to Opportunity: The Next Generation of Housing Mobility Policy

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Access to opportunity in employment, education, municipal services, and even personal safety and health, is strongly influenced by physical location. A growing body of research has found demonstrable harms and measurable disparities associated with living in high-poverty neighborhoods. Similarly, the available evidence also shows that housing mobility provides tangible benefits to many poor families who move to lower poverty and less segregated neighborhoods.

Recognizing that much of the underlying inequity in our society is engineered in spatial terms is crucial to designing a full and honest range of policy and family alternatives. It is important, of course, to continue to target resources to improve poor, racially isolated communities. But this cannot be our only policy alternative; housing choice and mobility must be part of the solution also. For example, poor families who face challenges relating to health, education, employment, or criminal justice can sometimes be helped by a change in location: a child with serious asthma may benefit more from a move to cleaner air than from additional drugs and treatment; a child whose academic potential is being squandered or who may have unaddressed learning needs may benefit from a move to a well-resourced and high performing school district; difficulties in finding and holding on to full time employment at a living wage may be remedied by a move to a job-rich community; and a young teenage boy who is beginning to experience run-ins with the police might be less likely to end up in prison as a young adult if his family moves to a low crime community. To achieve these types of outcomes, however, it is not enough to simply move a family – services must follow. This perspective will be the focus of much of the discussion below.

It is axiomatic that housing, education, employment, and health are interdependent systems; the challenge for housing mobility policy is to recognize the mechanisms of this interdependence and to plan accordingly. The housing-health nexus provides one important example of these dynamics: a family’s overall health can be positively affected by moving from a high poverty neighborhood to a lower poverty one. However, poor health can constitute a barrier to a successful move, and remaining tethered to city-based health care can sometimes hold families back from a commitment to their new community. Linking families with suburban health providers can both encourage successful long term relationships with the new community and may lead to improved health care and a more successful long term settling in to a community. Similarly, the full health benefits of moving to a healthier environment do not suddenly appear after a move is complete. Helping a family more effectively access both the health care systems and environmental benefits of a “healthier” community are crucial steps in the process.

Housing mobility is not the answer for every family – and obviously should not “replace” economic and social interventions in poor neighborhoods – but it would be wrong not to include mobility as an option to a family seeking assistance, or as a serious policy
alternative in response to some of these underlying social problems that are reinforced by geographic location.

Ultimately, federal and state policy in health, education, employment and criminal justice must incorporate these concepts of place and geographic mobility in a programmatic way. At the present, however, the only vehicle we have for housing mobility is the HUD-administered Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program. Virtually alone among federal housing programs, the Section 8 program has provided an option to families who choose to move to less segregated areas. Unfortunately, this benefit of the voucher program is not automatic, and is highly dependent on program features that include how higher-rent areas are treated, how public housing agencies (PHAs) receive their funding, how PHAs interact with families and with each other when a voucher crosses jurisdictional lines ("portability"), and the extent to which families receive housing search assistance. Each of these program features is subject to competing political, administrative and policy demands, and since the voucher program has no significant constituency outside of the housing industry, housing mobility becomes simply one goal among many.

This chapter will not dwell on the failures of the HUD voucher program to promote mobility – that has been briefed elsewhere. Rather, we will look to the future of housing mobility policy, and to the possible outlines of a new national mobility program, based on what we have learned. We will also explore the way that these interconnections with other policy sectors – education, employment, public health, and criminal justice – might lead to a broader constituency for expanding housing choice. As one public health expert recently observed, “[t]his nation’s housing voucher program has a natural constituency among public health practitioners and researchers committed to social justice.” The same should also be true for advocates working to address the minority achievement gap and the harsh racial impacts of our country’s mass incarceration policies. Housing mobility is too important to remain just a housing issue.

The new focus on post-move counseling: connecting families to opportunity

Recent research on housing mobility programs suggests that – in addition to reinstating the types of front-end interventions used by HUD in the 1990s to expand the range of neighborhoods accessible to voucher families – a more sophisticated effort to assist families after they move will be the key to success in future mobility programs. In the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) mobility experiment, low income families were placed in lower poverty neighborhoods in five different metropolitan areas, but with little or no assistance in accessing the opportunities available to them in the new neighborhoods. The mixed interim results of the MTO program, one might argue, are related to the absence of policies to actually connect MTO families with opportunity in their new communities – indeed, after dozens of studies, it seems increasingly obvious that if the goal is to connect low income families to opportunities in new communities, families may need some initial assistance in accessing those benefits. As Briggs & Turner conclude in their recent review of MTO research:
Future policy should be “mobility plus” .... We can and should link rental housing subsidies and counseling to workforce development, reliable transportation (e.g., through “car voucher” programs...), healthcare, informed school choice, and other family-strengthening supports. These tools would respond to families' varied needs and help families take full advantage of new and better locations.7

What might some of these interventions look like? Recent research on the Moving to Opportunity program offers some suggestions. We have also been fortunate to have been looking at these questions in the context of one of the strongest remaining mobility programs in the U.S., operating under court order in the Thompson v. HUD case in Baltimore, and working with our colleagues and with participants in the program there to improve post-move services and outcomes for families.8 We have also drawn some insights from a similar program in Dallas, which provides post-move counseling services for families in a mobility program originally established under the Walker v. HUD desegregation case.9 The discussion that follows will look to these examples and to recent social science literature in setting out an agenda for better connecting families to opportunities in their new communities.

Housing mobility and employment

The continuing “spatial mismatch” between African Americans and job-rich areas is greatest in highly segregated metropolitan areas, which also, not coincidentally, experience high rates of “job sprawl” to outer suburban areas. Poor Latino families are also geographically cut off from employment opportunities, but the geographic distance between African Americans and job rich areas is greater than for any other racial minority, and is an important contributing factor in disproportionate black poverty.10

But instead of moving poor families closer to areas of high job growth, the more recent emphasis seems to have been to leave poor minority families where they are, while simultaneously trying to improve access to jobs. One of these recent experiments – the “Bridges to Work” demonstration – sought to bus inner city public housing residents out to far flung suburban jobs in a reverse commute van program. This program appears to have been a failure (although this may be largely a result of flawed program design).11 A more ambitious program, “Jobs Plus,” directed intensive job counseling, job training and placement, child care assistance, and an earned income rent incentive to encourage public housing tenants to work without increasing their “tenants’ share” of the rent. Jobs Plus had some initial success, increasing employment rates and income for public housing residents in several, but not all of the pilot sites (Turner and Rawlings 2005).

Oddly, no similar job counseling and placement program has been directed to voucher families who moved to lower poverty neighborhoods in the parallel “Moving to Opportunity” housing mobility demonstration. These families were left to fend for themselves, even though the Jobs Plus results suggest that intensive one on one job

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counseling and placement efforts, combined with rent incentives, would improve employment outcomes for voucher families. In the relatively rich job environment of low poverty suburbs, one might expect the results of such a program to be dramatic. But such a combined housing-jobs connection has not yet been attempted — although Congress expressed a desire to make this connection with the 1999 “Welfare to Work Voucher Program,” which in the end generated many new vouchers but little in the way of intentional job connections.12

The first step in bringing employment services into a housing mobility program is to address the employment obstacles families face in higher opportunity, often suburban areas. “Moving alone simply cannot alleviate many of the obstacles that …voucher holders, who are mostly low-income, single mothers, face when finding and keeping jobs.”13 These barriers include imperfect information, inadequate transportation, health issues, lack of affordable child care, and financial disincentives. Research also suggests that many mobility clients face discrimination — or to put it more benignly, they may be near the bottom of the “suburban jobs queue.”14

Only by addressing these barriers can we expect improved employment outcomes. In Baltimore, the Regional Housing Campaign, along with the Greater Baltimore Urban League, is working to expand a successful city-based job counseling program to include suburban employers, and to assist a selected group of families who have moved to the suburbs through the Thompson mobility program. Ultimately, the goal is to apply the lessons and techniques of Jobs Plus and other successful workforce development programs, in the suburban context:

Perhaps mobility programs need to go beyond merely placing families in better neighborhoods and provide them with needed family and personal services and supports……An example of such a broader program is a Milwaukee-based work support program called New Hope, which helps families making the transition from welfare to work. Workers who documented thirty or more hours of work were provided with a package of benefits that included an income supplement that brought family income above the poverty line, a childcare subsidy, health insurance, and a temporary community service job if people needed it to make their thirty hours. New Hope provided a package of supports that made it possible for families, through full time work, to balance the kind of work and family demands that all families face. The New Hope package of supports would undoubtedly have helped many Gautreaux and MTO families, as well as many other low-income families.15

In order to enhance mobility clients’ chances of obtaining employment in suburban markets, another element of the program may include initial placement of workers on a temporary or probationary status, an approach that has already been used successfully by the Urban League in Baltimore and by the Transitional Work Corporation in Philadelphia.16 Also, it may be advisable to prioritize mobility resources to families who have already found employment in high opportunity areas but who are still living in the inner city. Helping these families move closer to their jobs has numerous economic

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and family benefits and will also tend to promote longer term job stability. There is also a political benefit: focus group research in the Baltimore suburbs has revealed positive attitudes to creating affordable housing options for low wage workers already working in the area, even though general attitudes towards affordable housing development are still problematic.

**Transportation**

The physical distance from job rich areas is exacerbated by the lack of flexible transportation. For example, one estimate found that inner city residents had access to 59 times as many jobs as their neighbors without cars.\(^\text{17}\) Another study – in metropolitan Atlanta – found that African Americans overall were far less likely to participate in suburban job markets than their white counterparts.\(^\text{18}\) It is not surprising that another recent study found that “residential relocation” and “car ownership” are the key factors in predicting the likelihood that welfare recipients will become employed.\(^\text{19}\)

To address this problem, foundation and church supported low income car ownership programs have sprung up in a number of cities.\(^\text{20}\) Most of these existing subsidized automobile programs are not associated with housing mobility programs, but car transportation is even more important for families seeking to move around within suburban areas to obtain and retain jobs. The Baltimore program, “Vehicles for Change,” has been funded by the Abell Foundation and the Baltimore Housing Authority to provide cars to Thompson housing mobility clients who are working in suburban counties. The program provides low cost financing for used cars, with monthly payments in the range of $70-98 for a fifteen month loan.\(^\text{21}\) There is a possibility of adding related supports to this program, including drivers education classes and transportation for clients in the process of seeking employment near their new apartments.

**Childcare**

Given the demographics of the Housing Choice Voucher program, housing mobility must be viewed, in part, as a gender issue.\(^\text{22}\) As one group of researchers observed in their study of “Gautreaux 2” families in Chicago,

> The obstacles these voucher holders face are different from the employment obstacles reported for men in the literature about inner-city joblessness. Our respondents are often the only caregivers for their children, and sometimes grandchildren, and shoulder all aspects of their care and well-being with few material resources.\(^\text{23}\)

Quality childcare should be built in to combined housing and job mobility programs. The “Jobs Plus” program showed that dependable childcare was a key factor in job retention for public housing residents.\(^\text{24}\) The same result will obviously hold true for voucher holders living outside of public housing – their children also benefit from attending racially and economically integrated preschool programs.
Housing mobility and health

Interim results from the MTO program suggest that many participating families experience improved physical and mental health outcomes when they move to substantially lower poverty communities. In particular, adult obesity is “significantly lower among those who moved,” and participants experienced marked declines in psychological distress and depression.

The potential of housing mobility has begun to be noticed by public health advocates working to address minority health disparities. For example, Gail Christopher of the Joint Center Health Policy Institute recently observed,

As the links between low socio-economic status, concentrated poverty and poor health outcomes become more widely understood, proponents for eliminating health disparities through public health interventions will see housing mobility as an important contextually based intervention strategy …. By enabling families to move from concentrated poverty to low poverty neighborhoods, many “mechanisms” of the socio-economic status-disease correlation are addressed.

Other scholars, working in the environmental justice movement, have also begun to see that painstakingly cleaning up the polluted neighborhoods where poor people have been forced to live is not the only solution for all low income families:

We must at least acknowledge that, in some instances, exit and integration may be the best option for residents of particularly environmentally beleaguered, racially segregated communities. This contention differs from much of my previous work. I, like many who have been working as environmental justice advocates, have been animated by a vision of community empowerment for residents of poor communities of color. This vision tends to translate into the espousal of remedies aimed at preserving existing communities – "community preservationist" remedies. But I am concerned that I may have been reifying 'the community' at the expense of the individuals and families who may have distinct needs and aspirations. These needs and aspirations may in fact be better met by finding ways for people to leave their current communities than by seeking to overcome decades of pollution and neglect.

Like other mobility-related outcomes, the positive health results experienced by MTO families are not related to any specific health “interventions”. MTO families received no pre-move health assessment, no health counseling, and no assistance in accessing health resources in their new communities. We can only imagine how much stronger the health outcomes could be for these families if some basic health interventions – to augment the benefits of the move itself – had been taken.

It may also be possible to target housing mobility to those families and children that need it the most. If it is possible to identify children who are particularly sensitive to asthma
triggers in the neighborhood, for example, or adults suffering from stress related hypertension or depression, a voluntary move may be a cost effective supplement to other forms of treatment and intervention. A similar analysis may be possible for children with lead paint poisoning or obesity. Some obvious applications of this principle would include the voluntary transfer of women facing repeat domestic violence, children who have been traumatized by witnessing violent assaults, or young teenage girls who may be the targets of repeated sexual harassment.29

As noted earlier, for some families, personal health and health system needs present barriers to successful mobility. Some families are reluctant to leave the medical providers they are used to, and some suburban medical providers are unwilling to serve families on Medicaid. Physical disabilities and depression can present obstacles to employment, although perhaps to a smaller number of potential movers. In a recent survey of families in the “Gautreaux 2” group, researchers found that personal “[h]ealth concerns were the primary barrier to mobility for less than 10 percent” of families surveyed.30

The Baltimore Regional Housing Coalition has proposed several health-based enhancements to the successful regional mobility program there – to help maximize the potential health benefits of mobility for participating families. The initial plan will be to train counseling staff to conduct simple family health and nutrition assessments, which will provide a baseline to assess each family’s progress, and will also help to develop a plan for health improvement. A second phase of the program will seek to recruit health providers to connect each family with local doctors and dentists in the family’s new community.

**Housing mobility and education**

There is a large body of social science evidence on the benefits of school integration for low income children of color. Attending lower poverty, racially integrated schools will tend to improve critical thinking skills and academic achievement; promote cross-racial understanding and reduce prejudice; prepare students for an integrated workforce; lead to more integrated residential choices later in life; and lead to higher graduation rates and better access to employment networks after graduation.31

At the same time, there is strong evidence that excessive school mobility – moving from school to school – will have detrimental educational impacts for children.32 The goal for successful educational outcomes for mobility families should be to get children into low poverty, higher functioning schools, and to help them stay there – by making sure each family’s housing placement is as stable as possible.

One of the limitations of the Moving to Opportunity experiment was its inability to move most participants into significantly higher performing schools.33 Partly because program placement was defined only in terms of neighborhood poverty rate, in most cases, MTO students moved to schools in other neighborhoods within their original school district.
Future housing mobility programs should be careful to avoid this outcome. In most metropolitan areas, differences in academic resources, achievement, and school poverty rates in city vs. suburban schools are significant, and in some cases they are extreme. Families need to be given the choice of moving to a higher performing school district. For example, the Inclusive Communities Project in Dallas is directly linking its landlord recruitment efforts to Texas school accountability standards.\textsuperscript{34} A similar approach, using state-by-state school rankings under No Child Left Behind, should be incorporated into future national housing mobility policy: Section 8 programs should be required to offer families the option of placing their children in high performing schools, and one measurement of Section 8 program performance should include family placement rates in high performing vs. low performing school zones.

For families that have successfully moved to a high performing school district, school-focused counseling can help children more quickly and successfully access the benefits of the schools they are now attending, and can help encourage children and families to stay in their new school placements. There are interesting models for this type of support system from long running city-suburban school transfer programs in Boston, St. Louis, and Hartford, where support services for inner city children in suburban schools have sometimes proved crucial to their success. For example, the housing mobility program may elect to add specialized educational/social work staff to serve as a resource for families and children, and to work with receiving school districts to ensure appropriate placements for participating children. Other supports might include after-school transportation, assistance with pay-to-play costs for school and town sports leagues, extracurricular activities, drivers education classes, and so on. Some students may also benefit academically from summer camp activities and summer academic enrichment programs.

The housing mobility program in Dallas has recognized the dynamic relationship between housing mobility and education, and is focusing its post-move counseling efforts in the schools. As the program’s director, Betsy Julian, has observed, “the schools are the best initial point of contact with the community for our families.” For mothers who have decided to move, largely for the benefit of their children, involvement in the schools is a natural step, helps them connect socially with other families, and leads easily to other community connections.
Easing the transition to new communities for teenage boys

One of the most surprising outcomes of the Interim Report on the Moving to Opportunity program was the difference in outcomes for teenage boys and girls. While girls in families moving to lower poverty neighborhoods had lower rates of delinquency and “risky behavior,” boys did not enjoy the same benefits, and had a “higher risk of smoking marijuana and cigarettes, drinking alcohol, problem behavior, and risk behavior” than girls.

Some of the initial explanations for these gender differences point the way to possible interventions:

One possible explanation is that black and Hispanic boys moving to integrated or predominantly white neighborhoods are not engaging in any more criminal behavior but are being arrested more due to racial profiling or higher rates of detecting crime in low poverty areas.

We speculate that [failure to avoid trouble] is partly responsible for the fact that experimental group boys are far more likely to forge ties with delinquent peers than control boys.

Another possibility is that some boys respond differently to the loneliness, fears, or boredom associated with relocation: new peers and expectations, a loss of familiar activities, the felt need to act tough to gain respect, and more.

Though we found no differences in contact with biological fathers across program groups, experimental boys are far less likely to have strong connections to non-biological father figures.

These gender differences will likely generate important new research in the coming years, but for mobility practitioners, the difficulty faced by some teenage boys is another reason to follow up with families after they move. But no one is providing the resources to do this. Teenage boys are in a sense being left stranded in their new neighborhoods.

In Baltimore, our initial response has been to propose programs of connection for teenage boys. It is especially important to ensure that each boy has access to employment, sports, and social and extracurricular activities through their schools (including assistance with school uniforms, pay-to-play fees, and after-school transportation). An active teen employment program is also part of the solution: after-school connections for boys in local supermarkets, fast food restaurants, and institutional employers, and a summer jobs program. We are also seeking support for after-school programs at selected rental complexes, to encourage teenage boys to avoid the kind of innocuous behavior likely to attract suburban police officers. Outreach to suburban police forces is also part of the solution.
While teenage girls, in general, seem to be adjusting well to the transition to new communities, they also have needs which the next generation of mobility programs will need to address. Women’s rights advocates have recognized the important benefits of housing mobility for increasing access to economic opportunity, improving women’s health, and most importantly, protecting women and girls from physical harm.\textsuperscript{42}

Conclusion

In the twenty years since the first studies of the Gautreaux mobility program began to be published, our understanding of housing mobility has become increasingly sophisticated. These programs are not the ultimate “solution” to urban poverty and segregation, but they are crucially important for the families who choose to participate, and they are an important step toward more equitable and integrated metropolitan regions. There will surely be a need for further research, but we have learned enough about the dynamics of housing mobility and its relation to health, education, child development, and employment, to begin to design the next generation of housing mobility programs.
Notes

1 Executive Director, Poverty & Race Research Action Council (PRRAC). I am grateful for the research assistance of Alanna Buchanan, a Law & Policy Intern at PRRAC in 2006, and for the ideas and collaboration of my colleagues in the Baltimore Regional Housing Campaign and others working through the Thompson v. HUD desegregation case to improve housing mobility options for Baltimore families. Special thanks to Patrick Maier, Barbara Samuels, Gene Rizor, Margy Waller, and Betsy Julian. I am also indebted to Xavier de Souza Briggs and Margery Austin Turner, members of PRRAC’s Social Science Advisory Board, whose recent article, “Assisted Housing Mobility and the Success of Low-Income Minority Families: Lessons for Policy, Practice, and Future Research,” is a basic point of departure for this chapter.


5 Tegeler, Cunningham, and Turner, Keeping the Promise.

6 Gail Christopher, “Housing Mobility and Public Health,” in Keeping the Promise.


8 The Baltimore housing mobility program is funded by HUD and administered by the Housing Authority of Baltimore County, under contract to Quadel, Inc. (which runs the “tenant-based” mobility program for former public housing residents searching for housing in the five suburban counties) and the Innovative Housing Institute (which runs the “project-based” mobility program, recruiting specific landlords in the suburban counties to set aside units for voucher families). The program is monitored by a panel that includes plaintiffs’ attorneys from the Maryland ACLU. The enhanced-mobility work described here is being done in coordination with the Baltimore Regional Housing Campaign with grant support for various elements of the work from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Morton and Jane Blaustein Foundation, the Abell Foundation, the Baltimore Community Foundation, the Goldseker Foundation, and the Open Society Institute. PRRAC’s work on housing mobility and health has also been supported by the Taconic Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

9 Elizabeth Julian, “Promoting Successful Moves in Dallas” in Keeping the Promise.

10 Michael Stoll, “Job Sprawl and the Spatial Mismatch between Blacks and Jobs” (Brookings Institution Survey Series, 2005)

11 Margery Austin Turner and Lynette A. Rawlings, Overcoming Concentrated Poverty and Isolation: Lessons from Three HUD Demonstration Initiatives (Urban Institute, July 2005)


14 Reed, Pashup and Snell, 2005.


18 Institute on Race & Poverty, Determining Equity in Access to Recent Dramatic Job Growth in the Atlanta Region (University of Minnesota, March 2006)


20 Waller, 2006

21 Ibid.

22 Emily J. Martin, “Housing Mobility as a Women’s Rights Issue,” in Keeping the Promise.

23 Reed, Pashup and Snell, 2005.


27 Christopher, 2005.


30 Jennifer Pashup, Kathryn Edin, and Greg Duncan & Karen Burke, “Participation in a Residential Mobility Program from the Client’s Perspective: Findings from Gautreaux Two,” Housing Policy Debate (v. 16, no 3&4) (2005)


Thus, the positive school outcomes found for suburban vs. city movers in the Gautreaux housing mobility program – see, e.g., Julie Kaufman and James Rosenbaum, “The Education and Employment of Low-Income Black Youth in White Suburbs,” 14 Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis 229 (Fall 1992) – were not found in the interim MTO results, likely because most MTO movers did not leave the city.

The Dallas mobility program is mapping potential neighborhoods based on the Texas Education Agency’s ranking system in which schools are identified as Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable, and Low-Performing.


Popkin, Leventhal, and Weisman, 2006; Martin, 2005.