

## Limited Exposure: The Importance of Activities and Services for Children on Housing Mobility and Neighborhood Effects

Housing mobility programs attempt to move poor families from concentrated poverty into affluent neighborhoods with the anticipated effect that the families will benefit from the employment opportunities, social networks and higher quality schools and services available to them in these new neighborhoods. However, evidence from the social experiment, the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) housing mobility program, shows that many of these families make subsequent moves (Orr et al. 2003). While these secondary or subsequent moves tend to be to neighborhoods that are not as poor as their original public housing communities, families often “regress” back to neighborhoods that have higher poverty levels than the neighborhoods they are placed in. Preliminary analysis of the Gautreaux Two housing mobility study shows a similar behavior of “regressing” back to poorer neighborhoods through subsequent moves. These trends beg the question, why are families moving from more affluent neighborhoods to higher poverty communities?

In an attempt to begin unraveling this question, my paper focuses on programs and activities low-income families use for their children, and how this changes when they move from public housing areas to the low-poverty neighborhoods. This exploration is intended to gain a greater understanding of the importance of neighborhood, especially for low-income families.

As families in the housing mobility programs move away from the more affluent neighborhoods they are initially placed, the intended neighborhood effects of the mobility program are potentially curtailed. There are several reasons that families may move away from the middle-class neighborhoods they are placed, including: proximity to family or employment, and transportation issues. Another reason that families may move away from affluent neighborhoods is because they do not integrate or connect to the community, and are not able to build local networks of support. Access to resources and support services for children in the new neighborhood, or lack thereof, could help explain subsequent moving behavior. If this is the case, then this might help explain the limited effects of housing mobility programs on families (Orr et al. 2003).

Using qualitative data from the evaluation of the Gautreaux Two housing mobility program, I investigate and compare what families perceive as resources or services for children that are available to them in both the concentrated poverty neighborhoods where they originate, and the more affluent neighborhoods they move to. Specifically, how are mothers using the resources and support services for their children when they live in public housing communities, and how much of this is neighborhood-based? This exploratory question will give us a picture of what resources are accessible for public housing residents living in these highly concentrated poverty neighborhoods, and how mothers access them.

Although Wilson (1999) notes that these communities are plagued by social isolation, there are still several resources and services for children that families can use in these neighborhoods. Furthermore, we do not know what activities and services low-income mothers will be able to access for their children in the new affluent neighborhoods where families move. If the activities and services for children are less accessible in the new neighborhoods, or are qualitatively different from what middle-

class families use for their children, this could be an important barrier to integration and limit the effect of mobility programs.

Looking at how access to and use of neighborhood programs for children changed among families who moved only once in the study, compared to families who made a subsequent move, may help reveal whether activities for children are an important factor in moving behavior. At this point, I am looking for themes in these two groups and whether there are differences in neighborhood-based resources for children. As the data becomes available, in the future I plan to take this a step further by quantifying the data from the Gautreaux Two study, and testing whether a low level of neighborhood-based resources or services available to families in the new neighborhood predicts a subsequent move. Also, is this second move to a neighborhood with a higher level of perceived resources for children?

### I. Theoretical Focus

Much research discusses the mechanisms through which neighborhood effects can occur (Meyer and Jencks 1989; Tienda 1991; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber 1997; Booth and Crouter 2001). Virtually all these mechanisms, however, assume some level of exposure. If families make subsequent moves to different neighborhoods, then there is limited exposure and the mechanisms through which neighborhood effects operate are constrained. Thus, it is important to understand what is driving the moving behavior of families and how they choose to make subsequent moves. Exploring whether or not resources exist for these families in their new affluent neighborhoods is one way of determining this.

Research on how public housing residents chose neighborhoods gives some insight as to what is important for these families (Clampet-Lundquist 2004). In the Gautreaux Two study, neighborhood choice is based on income and race guidelines. In Chicago, large-scale housing segregation limits the geographical areas where families can live. Most neighborhoods on the south side do not qualify as “opportunity areas” where the participants may move. Therefore, some families coming from public housing projects on the south side must either decide to move to the suburbs or the north side of the city, which is often farther than the suburbs.

Clampet-Lundquist (2004) studied neighborhood choice among public housing residents in Philadelphia who were forced to relocate from their building which was slated for demolition as part of the HOPE VI housing transformation. She finds that most residents base housing choices on what is most compatible with the household daily routine. Most of her sample stays within South Philadelphia, nearby where their public housing development was located. Although they move to more diverse neighborhoods, she finds that these neighborhoods have large proportions of black residents. She notes that mothers say living in the city, or near their old neighborhood, grants them convenience and proximity to services and “amenities” (Clampet-Lundquist 2004, 429). Thus, when given a choice of where to live, families tend to stay closer to the people and places that they know. In light of this finding, it may not be so surprising that we find many families in the MTO and Gautreaux Two programs that “regress”.

## II. Data and Research Methods

The Gautreaux Two (G2) housing mobility program, established in October 2001 by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), made housing vouchers available to 500 families to move from public housing into “opportunity areas” in the private market (Edin et al. 2003). These “opportunity areas” are census tracts that must have at least 75 percent of the population living above the federal poverty line, and no more than 30 percent of the population can be African-American. These neighborhood guidelines are historically linked to the original Gautreaux program that was instituted in the 1970’s in response to a lawsuit filed against the CHA for intentional racial segregation through public housing. Thus, the program aims to integrate neighborhoods based on both income and race. Families received some assistance from housing counselors to help find suitable units in qualifying neighborhoods.

The Gautreaux Two Evaluation study randomly selected 91 families who are participating in the G2 program and follows them through the program (Edin et al. 2003). Starting at program orientation, fieldworkers conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with the families as they conducted the search process, moved into a new unit, and any subsequent moves for up to two years. In-depth interviews, lasting from two to four hours, occurred in the respondents’ homes approximately every six months over the two years. The fourth wave of data is currently being collected. This data is extremely valuable as these interviews capture the process of moving into a unit in an affluent neighborhood, the experience, and what motivates subsequent moves.

For this paper, I am analyzing data from the first two waves of the Gautreaux Two housing mobility study. When the data becomes available, I will be able to analyze the third and fourth waves in the future. As most of the baseline interviews took place while participants were still living in public housing, before moving with the housing voucher, respondents were asked about use of assistance and strategies for getting by, as well as use of activities for their kids. Interviews were transcribed and later organized into topical themes.

Using qualitative analysis, I read transcripts with detailed information collected about what activities their children are involved with, and look for themes of what families use and how much of this is dependent on the neighborhood. This information allows a better understanding of what programs families perceived as accessible for their children in their original public housing neighborhoods, and how much they used them. Additionally, following those families who moved out of public housing with the housing voucher, I read about what activities their children are involved with in the new affluent neighborhoods. Also, concerns about cost or transportation related to use of activities are brought up here. Finally, I am comparing the differential levels of resources that families use in public housing to their new “opportunity area” neighborhoods and see whether there are differences for families who make subsequent moves.

## III. Findings

I expect to find that activities and programs for children are an important mechanism through which poor families can integrate into new neighborhoods. Thus, those families who experience a lower level of resources in the “opportunity area” neighborhoods, are more likely to make a subsequent move. This second move will likely be to a place where the family perceives resources levels are higher.

At this stage in analysis, I know that 49 families have made at least one move using the Gautreaux Two housing voucher. Of this group of movers, 14 have already made a second move and 13 more are planning a second move. Only one-third of the respondents who have made secondary moves have moved to another opportunity area, and only two respondents who are planning to move have specified that they would like to stay in an opportunity area. Many of these moves have been to other city neighborhoods, most commonly to the north side of the city. Others have moved to suburbs, often south or west of the city.

Interviews with parents involved in the Gautreaux Two program revealed a prevalence of activities for children in the public housing neighborhoods where they lived. Many of these activities are affordable and accessible, and over half of all mothers reported having a child or children involved in after-school programs or activities. However, several mothers presented concerns about the level of quality and safety of these programs.

When moving to low-poverty neighborhoods, families had mixed experiences finding programs and services for their children in these new communities. Some mothers reported that the new neighborhood schools have more activities for children than the old schools. At the same time, though, many mothers raised issues that activities for their children were less available and more costly in the new neighborhoods.

The role played by neighborhood-based activities and programs in subsequent decisions to move is still an empirical question. While I suspect this plays an important role for predicting moving behavior for some families, it is likely one of many reasons that families choose to move. Future research expanding on this paper to include financial resources and institutions of social support could help further explain moving behavior. Finally, looking at information networks in addition to accessibility would be vital in exploring the underlying mechanisms of how families integrate into new communities.

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