

# Helping Poor Families Gain and Sustain Access to High-Opportunity Neighborhoods

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Where we live—and where our children grow up—matters. A considerable body of social science research documents the negative effects for individuals and families of living in high-poverty, distressed neighborhoods. Studies across many domains—including education, health, sexual activity, criminal involvement, and employment—find that young children, teens, and adults from these neighborhoods suffer, other things being equal.<sup>1</sup>

The Moving to Opportunity demonstration (MTO) was launched in the early 1990s to rigorously evaluate the impacts of using housing vouchers to enable very low income families with children to escape from distressed, high-poverty neighborhoods and move into healthy, low-poverty communities. MTO was inspired by an earlier experiment (the Gautreaux program) in which low-income black families in Chicago moved to predominantly white, suburban neighborhoods. Findings from the Gautreaux experiment suggested that moving to an opportunity-rich neighborhood might lead to better educational and employment outcomes for children and their parents.<sup>2</sup>

## Key Findings

- Neighborhoods that offer access to one dimension of opportunity do not necessarily offer access to others.
- The availability and spatial distribution of high-opportunity neighborhoods varies across metro areas.
- Few MTO families spent much time in high-opportunity neighborhoods.
- Among MTO families that initially gained access to high-opportunity neighborhoods, many lost access almost immediately.
- A small number of families were able to sustain access to high-opportunity neighborhoods over the long term.
- Very few families that did not initially move to high-opportunity neighborhoods subsequently gained access.

In the MTO demonstration, families that lived in public and assisted housing projects and that volunteered to participate were randomly assigned to one of three groups. The *experimental group* received housing vouchers that (for the first year) could only be used in low-poverty neighborhoods, along with mobility counseling and search assistance; the *comparison group* received regular housing vouchers that could immediately be used in any neighborhood; and the *control group* continued to receive housing subsidies in the original development. MTO participants have been tracked systematically over the intervening years to support analysis of long-term economic, educational, and health outcomes.

Recently released evaluation results conclude that, 10 to 14 years after their initial moves, the MTO experimental families enjoy significantly better health outcomes than the control group, but not higher employment, incomes, or educational attainment.<sup>3</sup> One possible reason the gains were limited to health outcomes is that the special mobility assistance provided by MTO did not enable the experimental families to gain and sustain access to high-opportunity neighborhoods. Although experimental group families moved to better-quality housing and safer neighborhoods than their counterparts in the control group, few spent more than a year or two in low-poverty neighborhoods. In other words, the neighborhood environments experienced by the three groups of families over the life of the MTO demonstration appear more similar than was anticipated by the original demonstration design.

What happened to the MTO families after their initial moves to low-poverty neighborhoods? Why did the mobility assistance they received not result in longer exposure to the high-opportunity neighborhoods? This brief draws upon data from the most recent survey of MTO participants to explore patterns of residential mobility, including the extent to which families gained and sustained access to high-opportunity neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup>

### **1. Neighborhoods that offer access to one dimension of opportunity do not necessarily offer access to others, and families may have to sacrifice some dimensions of opportunity to access others.**

Although most people have an intuitive sense of what makes a neighborhood desirable—good schools, low crime, high-quality housing—there is no scholarly consensus on what constitutes an opportunity-rich or high-quality neighborhood. For this analysis, we developed indicators at the census tract level that reflect four dimensions of neighborhood opportunity: employment and income, education, racial/ethnic composition, and proximity to low-wage jobs. Three of these indicators reflect the socioeconomic status (SES) of a neighborhood’s residents, and the fourth reflects the neighborhood’s physical proximity to potential employment opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

- **High-work and -income** neighborhoods are defined as census tracts with poverty rates below 15 percent and labor force participation rates above 60 percent.
- **High-education** neighborhoods are defined as tracts where more than 20 percent of adults have completed college.

- **Predominantly white** neighborhoods are defined as tracts where the share of population that is non-Hispanic white exceeds 70 percent.
- **High-job-density** neighborhoods are tracts with over 200,000 low-wage jobs located within five miles of the tract centroid.

Each of these indicators reflects a dimension of neighborhood opportunity that potentially affects individual outcomes either jointly or independently. However, we do not suggest that these indicators reflect all the potentially relevant dimensions of neighborhood opportunity or that we have identified the best indicators of the dimensions they represent. Instead, we see this as a first, exploratory foray into identifying high-opportunity neighborhoods, understanding MTO participants’ access to them, and assessing the implications for the longer-term welfare of both children and adults. Future research can and should refine these indicators, draw on additional data sources, and test alternative indicators and additional dimensions of neighborhood opportunity. In particular, past research suggests that indicators of neighborhood safety and access to healthy food choices warrant attention in future research.<sup>6</sup>

The four dimensions of neighborhood opportunity overlap, but they do not define a single set of neighborhoods. Neighborhoods that rank high on one indicator of SES—work and income, education, or race/ethnicity—often rank high on the others as well. However, these high-SES neighborhoods are quite distinct from neighborhoods offering proximity to low-wage jobs.

**Table 1. Share of Tracts in MTO Metros Meeting High-Opportunity Definitions, 2000**

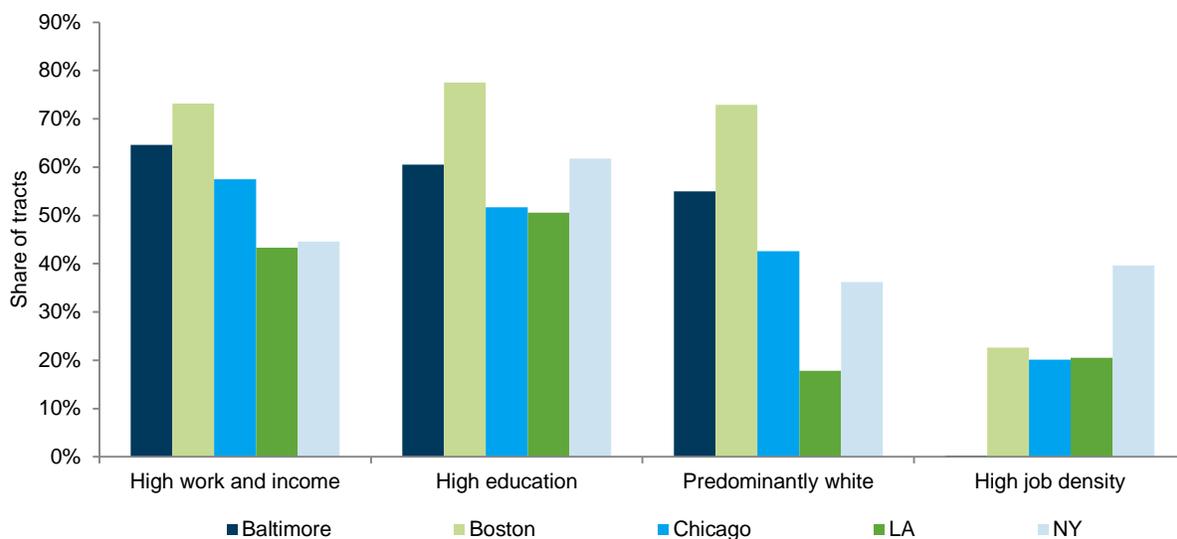
All MTO metro areas	% of all tracts	% that are also			
		High work and income	High education	Predominantly white	High job density
High work and income	50.4%	—	81.6%	63.4%	8.9%
High education	58.4%	70.4%	—	53.7%	22.9%
Predominantly white	37.2%	85.9%	84.3%	—	8.4%
High job density	27.4%	16.4%	48.9%	11.5%	—

Although there is still a lot to learn about what neighborhood attributes matter most, and for whom, housing voucher programs and mobility initiatives should help families assess different dimensions of opportunity offered by potential neighborhoods, using the most current data available. Relying on a single indicator, like neighborhood poverty, may obscure important neighborhood assets and deficits. Moreover, relying exclusively on decennial census data makes it difficult to assess changes in neighborhood conditions and may lead some families to relocate to declining neighborhoods. As our knowledge about the effects of particular neighborhood characteristics expands, mobility assistance, subsidized housing development programs, and neighborhood revitalization initiatives should prioritize the most important, opportunity-enhancing dimensions.

## 2. The availability and spatial distribution of high-opportunity neighborhoods varies across the five MTO metro areas.

As of 2000, the Boston and Baltimore metro areas had greater shares of neighborhoods with high SES: high work and income, predominantly white, and high education. In contrast, the New York metro area stands out as having the highest share of neighborhoods with high job density. Notably, the Baltimore metro had only one high-job-density neighborhood. Los Angeles had a particularly low share of predominantly white neighborhoods (figure 1).

**Figure 1. Share of High-Opportunity Tracts by Metro Area, 2000**

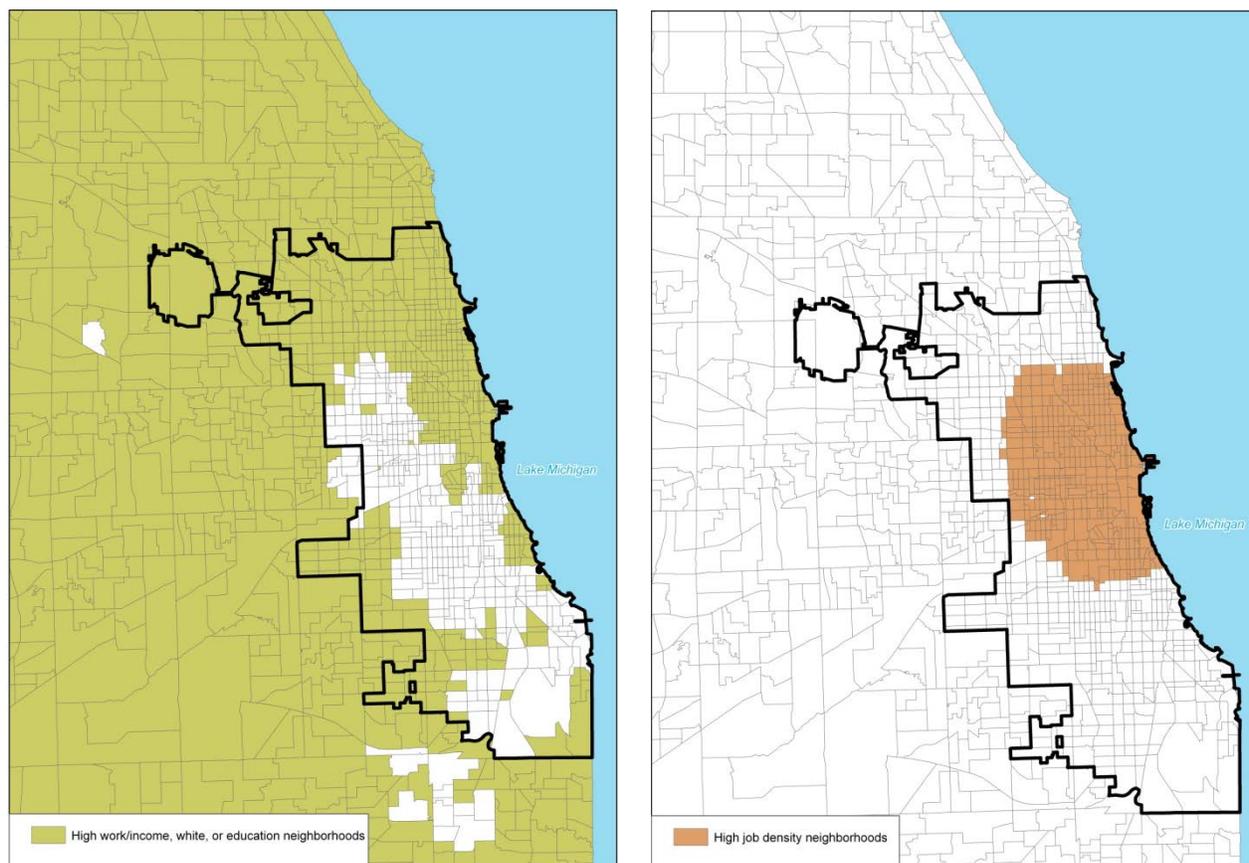


Although the share of high-opportunity neighborhoods differs across the five MTO metros, the spatial distribution of these neighborhoods is quite similar. Not surprisingly, high-SES tracts are mostly located in the suburbs, while tracts with high job density are much more concentrated in the central core. To illustrate, all of the neighborhoods surrounding the city of Chicago meet at least one of the SES-related opportunity thresholds, as do some neighborhoods in the north and southwest areas of the city. Conversely, figure 2 shows that the high-job-density neighborhoods are clustered in the central city

The basic pattern of the high-job-density neighborhoods concentrated in central cities is evident in Boston, Los Angeles, and New York as well. Some of the inner ring suburbs of three of these cities also qualify as high-job-density neighborhoods. Moreover, most suburban neighborhoods in all the MTO metros meet our thresholds for high work and income, high education, or predominantly white populations. But in some MTO metros, significant portions of the central city do as well. For instance, in Los Angeles, many neighborhoods within the city boundaries are high-SES and some outside these boundaries are not, while the high-job-density neighborhoods are primarily in the city's center. Boston and New York exhibit substantial overlap between

high-SES neighborhoods and areas close to jobs. In Boston, virtually all tracts meet one of our SES-related opportunity thresholds. And in New York, the density of high-SES and high-employment neighborhoods is extremely high.

**Figure 2. Location of High-Opportunity Tracts in the Chicago Metro Area, 2000**



Future research should explore these variations further, including the possibility that some indicators of neighborhood opportunity should be tailored to local market conditions. Local transportation networks, school enrollment policies, and labor market conditions may all influence the relative importance of different neighborhood characteristics. Ongoing research should also assess variations across metros in the availability of moderately priced rental housing in high-opportunity neighborhoods, and the ability of voucher holders to access this housing. This information may help explain differences between metros in MTO families' locational success.

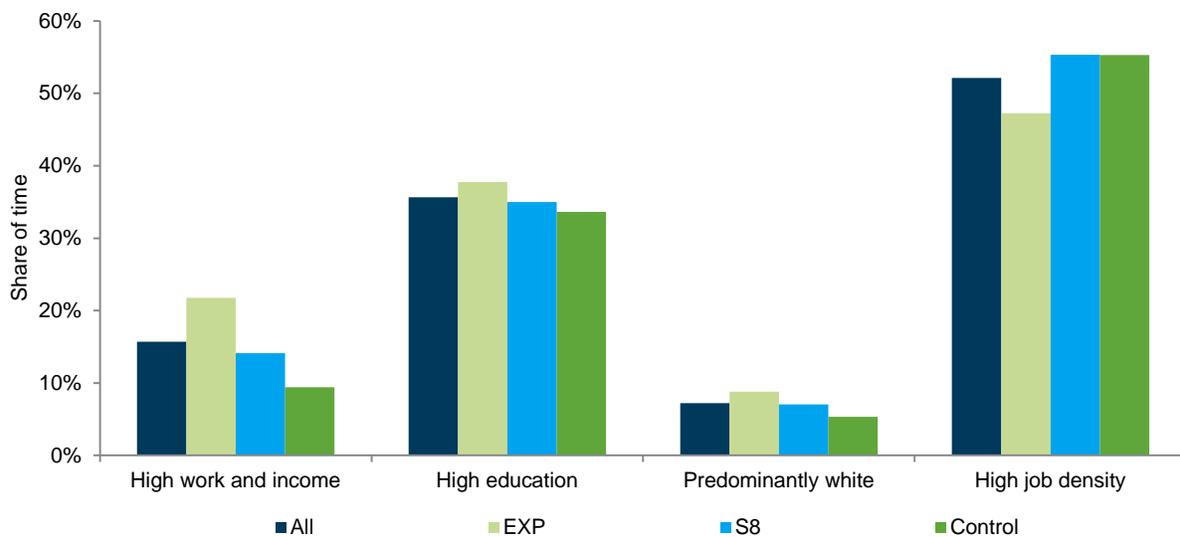
Policies designed to expand access to opportunity-rich neighborhoods for low-income households need to be sufficiently flexible to respond to local conditions. More specifically, goals and targets for housing voucher outcomes should reflect the local availability and spatial distribution of high-opportunity neighborhoods. In some cases, the definition of desirable destination neighborhoods could potentially vary across metros, in order to reflect, for example, the local public transit network or school enrollment boundaries. In metros where high-opportunity neighborhoods

are scarce or difficult to access, mobility programs might need supplemental resources in order to be fully effective.

### 3. Few MTO families spent much time in high-opportunity neighborhoods.

MTO participants were quite mobile. During the 10- to 14-year demonstration period, the average control group family moved more than twice, and MTO and Section 8 participants averaged 2.7 and 2.8 moves, respectively (Sanbonmatsu et al 2008).<sup>7</sup> By the end of the demonstration period, differences between the three groups in exposure to high-opportunity neighborhoods were quite modest (figure 3). For example, families in the experimental group averaged only 22 percent of their time (between random assignment and the final survey) living in high-work and -income neighborhoods, compared to 9 percent for their counterparts in the control group. And experimental group families averaged only 9 percent of their time in predominantly white neighborhoods, compared to 5 percent for the control group.

**Figure 3. Share of Time Spent in High-Opportunity Neighborhoods by MTO Participants**



The average MTO participant spent considerably more time in neighborhoods offering high job density than in high-SES neighborhoods, even though there were more high-SES neighborhoods in the five metro areas. For instance, experimental group families averaged 47 percent of their time in high-job-density neighborhoods but only 22 percent in high-work and -income neighborhoods.

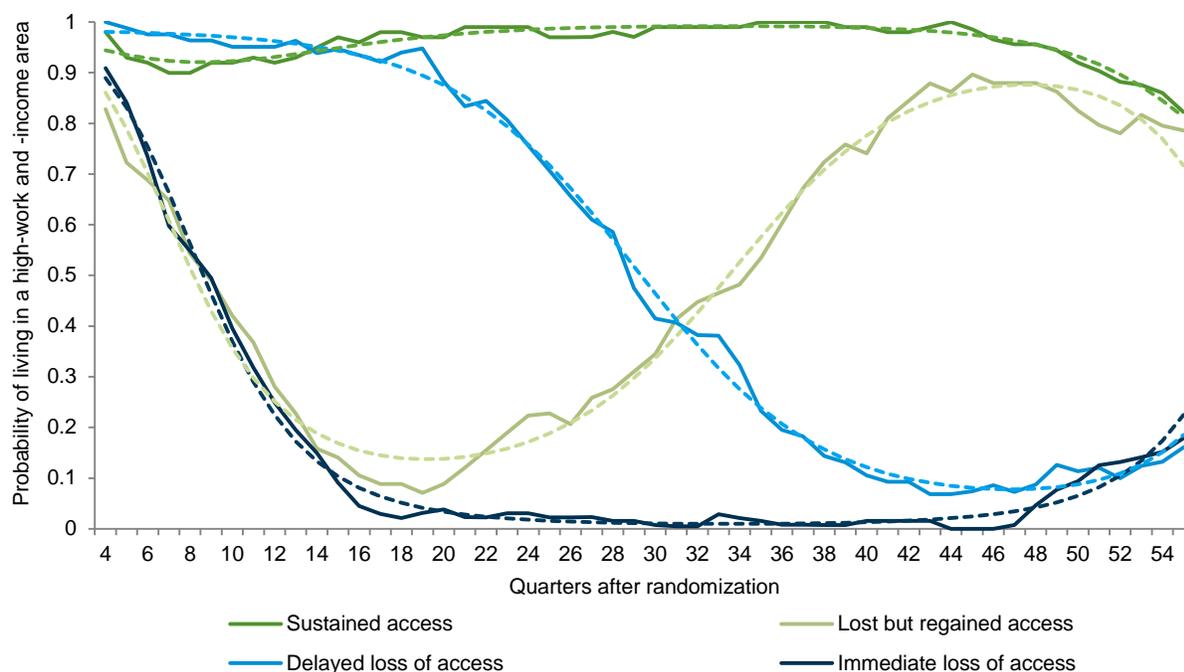
Ongoing analysis of the effects of the MTO treatment should acknowledge that the demonstration did not dramatically increase most families' exposure to high-opportunity neighborhoods. This disappointing reality may help explain why basic measures of MTO treatment effects are small. It would be a mistake to conclude too hastily that exposure to high-opportunity neighborhoods does not affect individual outcomes. Researchers should experiment with a wide range of analytic methods to assess the effects of neighborhood environment for MTO participants. For example,

those comparing experimental and control groups should take account of the small disparities in treatment (exposure to better neighborhoods along many dimensions) across these groups.

#### 4. Among MTO families that initially gained access to high-opportunity neighborhoods, many lost access almost immediately.

Among families that moved to high-opportunity neighborhoods at the outset, we find four distinct patterns over the subsequent decade. Some *sustained* their residence in high-opportunity neighborhoods throughout the period; some *immediately lost* access and did not regain it; some experienced *delayed loss* of access; and some *lost but regained* access.<sup>8</sup> Figure 4 illustrates these four patterns for our first opportunity indicator: high work and income.

**Figure 4. Mobility Trajectories for Families Initially Moving to High Work and Income Neighborhoods**



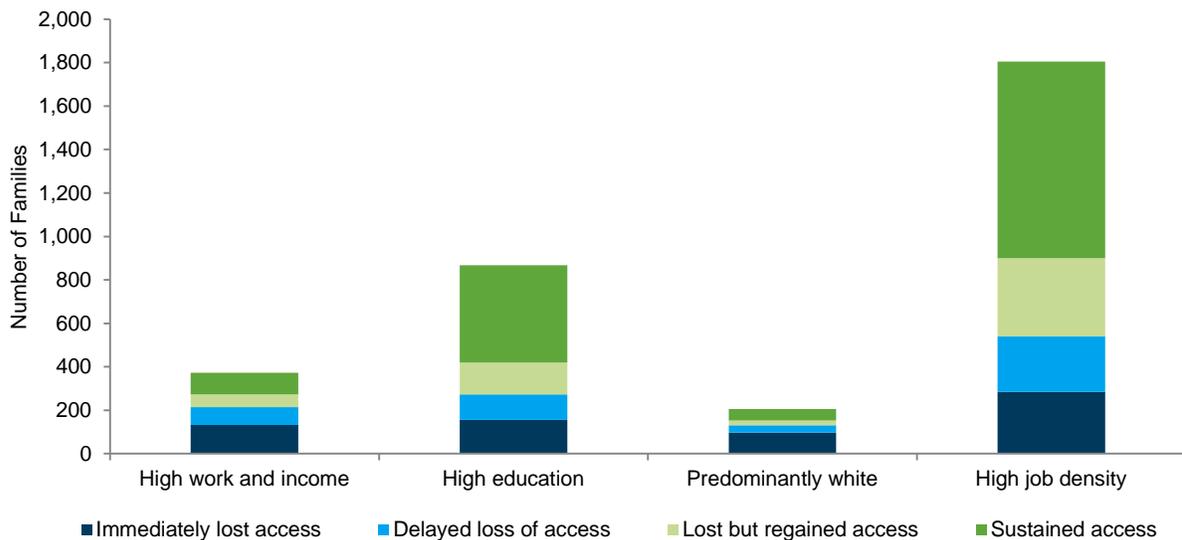
Note: The trajectory analysis method identifies a predicted probability trajectory for each group, similar to a line of best fit for that group. These predicted trajectories are shown as dotted lines. Actual shares of each group living in a high-opportunity neighborhood in a given quarter are shown with solid lines.

In this graph, the probability of living in a high-opportunity neighborhood is on the vertical axis, and quarters after randomization (4 through 55) are on the horizontal axis. Only 372 of more than 3,000 respondents were successful in moving to high-work and -income neighborhoods during the first four quarters following random assignment and, of these, just over a quarter (27 percent) remained in such neighborhoods for the next decade. A much larger share (51 percent) immediately lost access to high-work and -income neighborhoods, although 16 percent were able

to regain access later. Finally, 22 percent maintained access to high-work and -income neighborhoods for a year or more, but then lost access later.

The patterns are qualitatively similar for all our indicators of neighborhood opportunity (figure 5). However, the share of families in each category varies considerably across indicators. Very few families sustained (or ever regained) access to predominantly white neighborhoods. Over half (59 percent) of the families that initially moved to predominantly white neighborhoods immediately lost access, and another 16 percent lost access later. In contrast, roughly half of the families that initially moved to high-education neighborhoods and high-job-density neighborhoods did sustain access to these types of neighborhoods.

**Figure 5. Distribution of Families by Mobility Trajectory, for Those Initially Moving to High-Opportunity Neighborhoods**



Families left high-opportunity neighborhoods for three main reasons: they experienced problems with their lease or conflicts with the landlord, they were dissatisfied with how their housing was maintained, or they wanted a bigger or better-quality apartment. During the housing boom that occurred during the early to middle years of the last decade, families faced additional stressors, such as units being sold and rehabbed, rented above the voucher program rent ceiling, or removed from the voucher program altogether (Briggs, Comey, and Weisman 2010). Many families that made initial moves to safe, opportunity-rich neighborhoods were unprepared for the competition in the new, “hot” housing market: rents skyrocketed, landlords would not accept the vouchers, and extensive savings were required for security deposits, first and last months’ rent, and other credit requirements.

These findings strongly suggest that assisted housing mobility initiatives should look beyond the initial move and provide services that help families stay in high-opportunity neighborhoods.

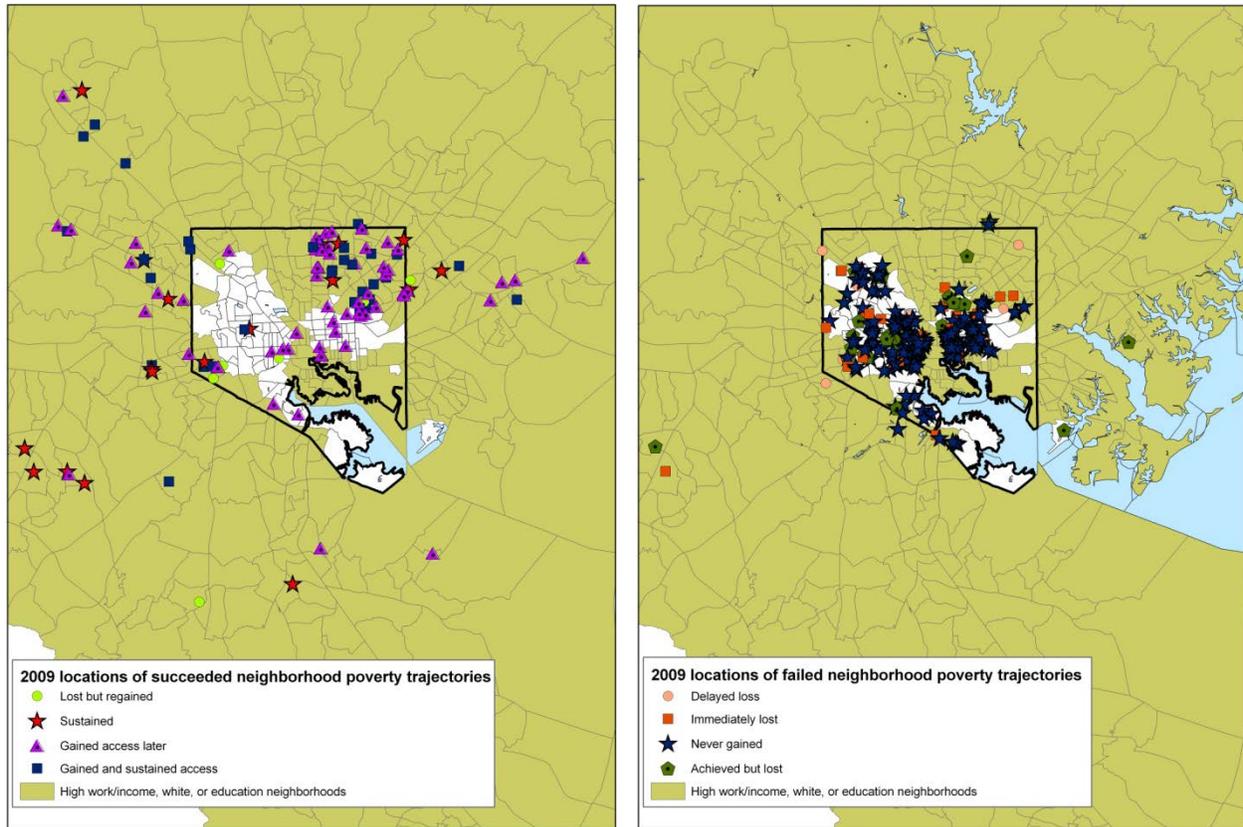
Performance measures for these programs should reflect the share of assisted families that stay in high-opportunity neighborhoods over time, not just the share of families that initially move to these neighborhoods. Our analysis of mobility trajectories suggests that the first two years following initial relocation may be the most important period for providing retention assistance. It may be possible for mobility programs to help families stay in the same units longer, reducing rates of mobility. But helping families relocate to another high-opportunity neighborhood (or one better matched to their needs and circumstances) may be equally important.

### **5. A small share of families that gained access to high-opportunity neighborhoods sustained that access over the long term.**

At the end of the 10- to 14-year demonstration period, families in the more successful trajectory groups lived in dramatically different neighborhoods than those in the unsuccessful groups. For example, among families that gained and sustained access to high-work and -income neighborhoods, the average neighborhood poverty rate at the end of the demonstration period was about 10 percent. Those that lost and then regained access or gained it later in the demonstration period also ended up in quite low-poverty neighborhoods, with average poverty rates of about 12 percent. And at the opposite extreme, families that never gained access to high-work and -income neighborhoods ended the demonstration in neighborhoods with poverty rates averaging about 27 percent.

Not surprisingly, the spatial distribution of families' final locations also varies dramatically by trajectory group. Figure 6 compares the locations of families in the Baltimore metro area that were successful and unsuccessful in gaining access to high-work and -income neighborhoods. Many of the successful families ended up in the northeast quadrant of Baltimore City, but a substantial share are more widely distributed throughout the region's suburbs. Families that initially moved to high-work and -income neighborhoods and sustained those moves over time are the most widely dispersed. In contrast, almost all the families in the unsuccessful trajectory groups are quite tightly clustered in Baltimore City. This fundamental pattern is repeated in the other MTO metros. Families in the unsuccessful trajectory groups mostly live within the city boundaries, with those that initially gained and then sustained access the most widely dispersed.

**Figure 6. Final Locations for Successful and Unsuccessful Trajectory Groups in Baltimore, 2009**



It is difficult to predict who will be successful in gaining and sustaining access to high-opportunity neighborhoods, even with assistance. A family’s employment status or welfare dependence do not appear to be significant factors, although education and age may be. African American families appear to have particular difficulty gaining and sustaining access to high-opportunity neighborhoods, possibly reflecting barriers of segregation, prejudice, and fear. Families who are motivated by the prospect of obtaining better schools for their children may be more successful in gaining and sustaining access to high-opportunity neighborhoods than those motivated primarily by the desire to escape from crime and violence.

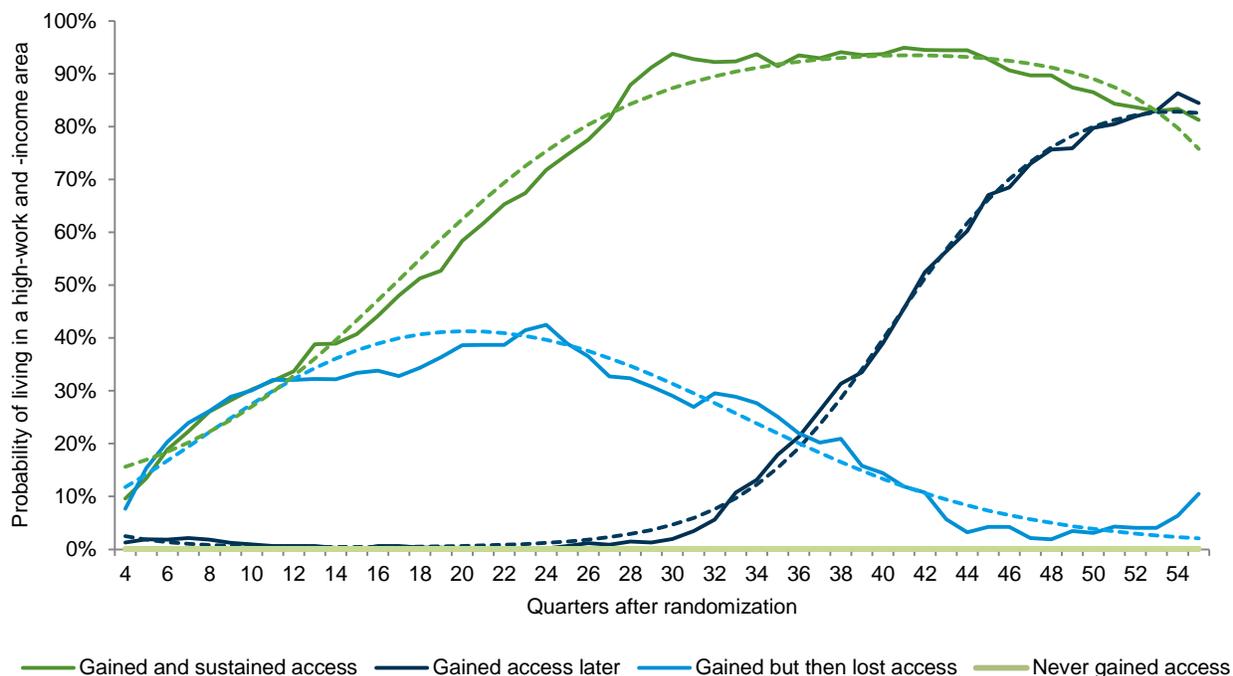
The fact that all five MTO metros offered many high-opportunity neighborhoods but that few MTO families were successful in gaining and sustaining access to them strongly suggests that potential effectiveness of housing vouchers and assisted mobility programs may be constrained by the lack of rental housing supply in high-opportunity neighborhoods (also see McClure 2008). Payment standards for the housing voucher program should be tailored to allow and encourage voucher recipients to gain and sustain access to high-opportunity neighborhoods. If moderately priced rentals are available in these neighborhoods, but voucher recipients are not able to access them, local policymakers and practitioners could step up efforts at both landlord outreach and fair housing enforcement. Assisted families may also need targeted help with up-front fees and

deposits. In addition, as affordable rental housing becomes scarcer, it is imperative to redouble efforts to provide more of it in high-opportunity areas, and to improve conditions in neighborhoods where affordable rentals are available now. In addition, new neighborhoods (developed over coming decades in response to population growth and household formation) should be shaped by strong and deliberate efforts to incorporate opportunity for low-income households.

**6. Very few families that did not initially move to high-opportunity neighborhoods subsequently gained access.**

Among families that did *not* move to high-opportunity neighborhoods at the outset, we find four distinct patterns over the subsequent decade (figure 7). Many *never gained* access to high-opportunity neighborhoods, some *gained and sustained* access, some *achieved but then lost* access, and some *gained access later*. From the 2,765 families that did *not* move to high-work and -income neighborhoods during the demonstration’s first year, three-quarters (74 percent) never gained access to such neighborhoods. Slightly more than 1 in 10 of these families did gain access early in the demonstration period, but only half of those sustained it. Another 10 percent gained access to high-work and -income neighborhoods later in the demonstration period.

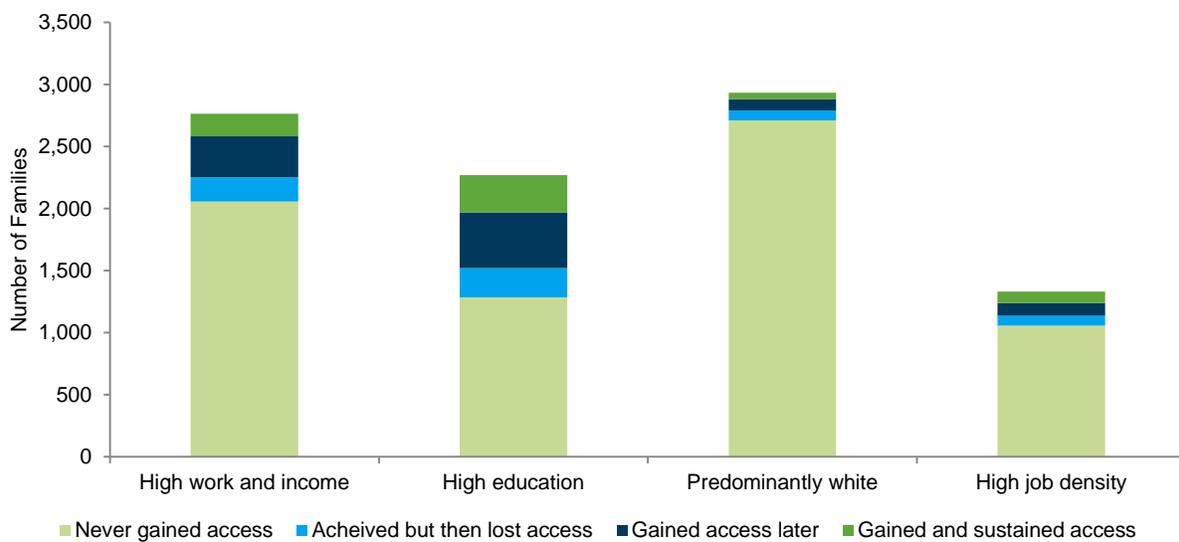
**Figure 7. Mobility Trajectories for Families Not Initially Moving to High-Work and -Income Neighborhoods**



*Note:* The trajectory analysis method identifies a predicted probability trajectory for each group, similar to a line of best fit for that group. These predicted trajectories are shown as dotted lines. Actual shares of each group living in a high-opportunity neighborhood in a given quarter are shown with solid lines.

Again, the patterns are qualitatively similar for all our indicators of neighborhood opportunity (figure 8). The vast majority of families that failed to gain access to high-opportunity neighborhoods at the outset did not gain access later either. The share that ever gained (or sustained) access to predominantly white neighborhoods was particularly low (2 percent). In general, families were no more likely to gain access to high-job-density neighborhoods than to neighborhoods with high socioeconomic status. The one exception is that 12 percent of the families that did not initially move to high-work and -income neighborhoods were able to gain access to such neighborhoods later in the demonstration period.

**Figure 8. Distribution of Families by Mobility Trajectory, for Those Not Initially Moving to High-Opportunity Neighborhoods**



Thus, without explicit assistance and incentives, low-income families are unlikely to move from distressed neighborhoods to high-opportunity neighborhoods. These results argue for strengthened incentives and supports that encourage housing voucher recipients to use their subsidies to move to high-opportunity neighborhoods.

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In sum, the findings presented here are sobering. Although MTO enabled families to escape from the most severely distressed neighborhoods, very few enjoyed sustained access to high-opportunity neighborhoods, despite the provision of targeted vouchers and one-on-one mobility counseling. Helping very low income families find, afford, and retain housing in high-opportunity neighborhoods requires more help than anticipated. These findings warrant further exploration. The MTO demonstration may not have produced all its intended results, but it offers a goldmine of information about the challenges facing very low income families, their patterns of residential mobility, and possible effects of neighborhood environments on their long-term well-being.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Popkin, Leventhal, and Weissman (2010), Turner and Rawlings (2009), and Ellen and Turner (1997) for summaries of this research.

<sup>2</sup> Because the Gautreaux experiment was part of a fair housing litigation settlement, it was explicitly designed to help black families move to predominantly white neighborhoods, which often meant suburban neighborhoods. The statutorily mandated MTO demonstration was not race-based. Instead, it focused on enabling families to move to low-poverty neighborhoods. However, the vast majority of low-poverty neighborhoods in the five demonstration sites are predominantly white and suburban. See Polikoff (2006); Briggs, Popkin, and Goering (2010); and Keels et al. (2005) for more information about the Gautreaux experiment and the origins of the MTO demonstration.

<sup>3</sup> See Sanbonmatsu et al. (2011) for the 10-year evaluation findings for the MTO demonstration. An interim evaluation of MTO outcomes (Orr et al. 2003) yielded very similar findings.

<sup>4</sup> The MTO demonstration was launched in 1994, but the actual start date varied across the five sites and not all participants enrolled at once. Some participants enrolled as late as 1998. The final survey (conducted in 2008 and 2009) asked respondents for all of their addresses since they were enrolled (and randomly assigned to a treatment group) and computed their neighborhood characteristics for each quarter from the date until the date of their final interview. The data and analysis summarized in this brief are presented in greater detail in Turner et al. (2011).

<sup>5</sup> For each indicator, we constructed distance-weighted tract values, where the value for a given tract is the weighted average of that tract's actual value and the values for adjacent and nearby neighborhoods. This approach effectively compensates for variations in tract size and population and reflects that the conditions experienced by residents of a census tract are affected not only by the characteristics of that (artificially defined) area, but also by the characteristics of surrounding areas. A low-poverty tract surrounded by much higher poverty tracts would presumably not offer the same benefits as a low-poverty tract in a sea of similar tracts.

<sup>6</sup> Research on neighborhoods and their relevance to family well-being has not produced definitive evidence on what criteria define "high-opportunity" neighborhoods (Turner, Popkin, and Rawlings 2009). In fact, some argue against using thresholds at all, suggesting that outcomes for families may improve continuously with incremental improvements in neighborhood conditions (Ludwig et al. 2008).

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that control group households moved almost as frequently as the experimental and Section 8 groups. This could be due in part to the demolition and redevelopment of public housing projects over the period, but it also reflects normal patterns of voluntary and involuntary departures from public housing (Lubell, Shroder, and Steffen 2003).

<sup>8</sup> These patterns were defined using a methodology known as group-based trajectory analysis (Nagin 1999, 2005). For details, see Turner et al. (2011).

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