A National Neighborhood Mobility Policy

Brett Theodos

Document date: March 19, 2010
Released online: March 19, 2010

The United States is a highly mobile nation. In 2008, 13 percent of Americans moved, though most of these moves were short distances: 66 percent of movers stay within the same county, and just 15 percent leave their state. Until now, we have had little information that we could use in tracking the outcomes over time for families who move, and even less that allowed us to understand the dynamics of the places families left and joined. A new report, relying on data on ten low-income neighborhoods from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections Initiative, allows just that. And the findings are striking.

We find that moving is not a monolithic experience for low-income families. Three in ten families who move are "up and out" movers, often becoming homeowners in better neighborhoods where they are more satisfied and optimistic. Just under a quarter of families who move are "nearby attached movers." They are stable, involved residents whose moves may have been dictated more by life-cycle factors than by a desire to leave their house or neighborhood. Close to half of all families, however, are "churning movers" for whom moving is characterized by instability. Often renters, and with very low incomes, they move short distances in response to financial stress or problems with their housing.

Given the significant effect moving has on families and especially the development of children, the near total absence of federal policy supporting opportunity moves or mitigating against churning moves is surprising. In contrast, the European Union declared 2006 the "Year of Mobility," showing its longstanding commitment to encouraging and facilitating opportunity moves. Yet in the United States, where numerous policies are devoted to income supports, housing, schools, and neighborhood development, we largely ignore the transition between places.

There is a role for the federal government to play. First, and most critically, *we need better strategies to help prevent churning moves*. These vulnerable families float among different services, without any provider ultimately responsible for helping families move—or helping them avoid having to. One way to reduce churning is through providing affordable housing. Expanding the availability of high-quality affordable housing, preserving the current stock of moderately priced rentals (most of which receive no subsidy), and helping families apply for and use housing assistance can contribute to greater housing stability. Schools, child welfare agencies, and other service providers must provide better supports to families to prevent housing instability. But ultimately, many churning movers will need short-term emergency assistance to prevent eviction, foreclosure, or a forced move. Evidence from homelessness prevention programs suggests that short-term assistance can make the difference in keeping a family from having to leave their apartment or house.

Second, *we need to promote opportunity moves.* For many families, moving is a step up to a better home or neighborhood, and policy should encourage these moves. Deconcentrating subsidized housing, providing increased access to information about neighborhood and school quality, aggressively tackling discrimination in the rental and ownership markets, and eliminating local ordinances that intentionally or inadvertently exclude low-income rental families from communities will help. Another way the federal government could effectively support opportunity moves is by making the moving expenses tax deduction refundable and available to low-income families moving to better neighborhoods or housing conditions, instead of only to work-related moves as currently designed.

Read the Full Report.

Other Publications by the Authors

- Brett Theodos