



Three-City Study  
of Moving  
to Opportunity

## Struggling to Stay Out of High-Poverty Neighborhoods: Lessons from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment

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*About a third of the Three-City experimental-group and comparison-group movers who first relocated to very low or low-poverty neighborhoods remained in the same type of neighborhood over time.*

Living in high-poverty neighborhoods, with their high unemployment rates, rampant crime, and struggling schools and other institutions, can have serious, negative consequences for the well-being and life chances of adults and children (see Ellen and Turner 2003). Distressed inner-city public housing developments are some of the worst, most destructive environments for families. Many of these communities are economically isolated and racially segregated, are overrun with gangs and drug trafficking, and offer little opportunity for residents (Popkin, Gwiasda et al. 2000).

Encouraging findings from Chicago's Gautreaux program, a court-ordered racial desegregation effort that helped public housing residents move to predominantly white, mostly suburban communities—an approach known as “assisted housing mobility”—suggested that such programs might be an effective way to help the inner-city poor. Studies indicated that Gautreaux adults who moved to the suburbs were more likely than their counterparts back in the city to be employed after moving and that children were more likely to finish high school and

attend four-year colleges (Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum 2000; Popkin, Buron et al. 2000; DeLuca and Rosenbaum 2002). However, the successful suburban movers were a select group, and the Gautreaux experience highlighted key challenges: only 19 percent of families that volunteered for the program successfully moved, and some families ended up back in the inner city (Keels et al. 2005; Turner and Briggs 2008). We still have much to learn about how long families need to be exposed to particular neighborhood environments in order to benefit from them; but understanding why families sometimes move back to high-poverty, unsafe areas after leaving them presents a fundamental challenge to the effective development of assisted mobility programs.

To help understand whether and how assisted housing mobility programs might succeed on a larger scale, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment in five metropolitan areas in 1994. MTO intended to give families in public and assisted housing the chance to move out of high-crime, high-poverty neighborhoods into

safer, low-poverty communities.<sup>1</sup> The hope was that beyond being much safer, these destination areas would offer better housing, schools, and jobs, which would in turn improve families' economic status, health, and educational outcomes. MTO targeted families living in some of the nation's most distressed public housing in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. Just over 5,300 very low income families volunteered for MTO in the five cities. The 4,608 who passed a basic screening were then randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups: an experimental group, a Section 8 comparison group, or a control group. (See text box on page 11 for descriptions of the groups.)

The MTO Interim Impacts Evaluation, mainly a follow-up survey of the MTO families at all five sites, was conducted in 2002. Of the 1,820 families assigned to the experimental group, just under half (47 percent, or 860 families) found a suitable apartment and successfully moved to a neighborhood with less than 10 percent poverty (according to the 1990 Census). However, almost half these original low-poverty neighborhoods had become poorer by Census 2000, suggesting that many MTO families had relocated to neighborhoods in decline (Orr et al. 2003).

For instance, 89 percent of experimental-group families successfully leased up in a low-poverty neighborhood (less than 10 percent poverty) based on the 1990 Census.<sup>2</sup> Neighborhoods changed so substantially in those areas that only 39 percent of the experimental-group families that initially moved to low-poverty neighborhoods still had neighborhoods with low poverty rates by the end of the decade, according to the 2000 Census. Also, experimental-group families tended to move to mostly minority neighborhoods in central cities and inner suburbs, not racially integrated areas in more affluent outer suburbs like the neighborhoods of suburban movers who participated in Gautreaux.

Many MTO experimental-group families moved on after the one-year programmatic requirement—some to much poorer areas. Over two-thirds of the experimental-group and Section 8-comparison families moved one to three times between leasing up and 2002. Again, using the 2000 Census for both points in time, the share of

experimental-group families living in low-poverty neighborhoods dwindled—from 39 percent at the time of the first move to 25 percent by 2002 (Orr et al. 2003). Even though MTO families were more successful than Gautreaux families in moving to low-poverty neighborhoods, the fact that so many MTO families left their original low-poverty neighborhoods after the first year and that many of the original destination neighborhoods grew poorer means many MTO experimental families may not have had the chance to experience the full benefits of living in lower-poverty neighborhoods.

The mostly qualitative Three-City Study of MTO, a large-scale, mixed-method study, was designed to examine key puzzles raised by the interim evaluation, including why experimental-group families left their low-poverty neighborhoods (see text box on page 11). The Three-City Study combined a large, stratified random sample of qualitative interviews, ethnographic fieldwork on a subsample of families, and analysis of census and administrative data. It was conducted in three of the five MTO sites: greater Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. The interviews and ethnographic fieldwork took place in 2004 and 2005, 6 to 10 years after families' initial placement through the MTO program.<sup>3</sup>

This brief uses the Three-City Study data to explore the mobility patterns of MTO experimental-group and Section 8 comparison-group families and the factors that influenced their moves.

### Where Three-City Study Families Lived

When the MTO experimental-group families first moved out of public housing, virtually all (90 percent) the experimental movers<sup>4</sup> moved to neighborhoods with less than 20 percent poverty, and more than one-third (39 percent) lived in neighborhoods with less than 10 percent poverty—the targeted MTO neighborhood, according to the 2000 Census (Orr et al. 2003).<sup>5</sup> By the time of the interim evaluation in 2002, 60 percent of the experimental movers lived in neighborhoods with less than 20 percent poverty, and 25 percent lived in neighborhoods with less than

10 percent poverty. By 2004, 27 percent of the Three-City Study experimental-mover families were living in neighborhoods with less than 20 percent poverty, and only 17 percent were living in neighborhoods with less than 10 percent poverty.<sup>6</sup>

The interim evaluation found that the Section 8 comparison-group mover families were more likely than experimental-group families to live in slightly higher-poverty neighborhoods in 2002. We found the same patterns in 2004 for the Three-City Study sample. Almost half the Section 8 comparison families lived in high-poverty neighborhoods, and very few (4 percent) lived in low-poverty neighborhoods.

### Household Mobility: Trajectories Over Time

It is one thing to compare report outcomes by treatment group at one point in time; it is another to understand where individual families lived at multiple points in time during the MTO program. Therefore, we tracked the Three-City Study's individual households' place of residence at several points in time with their corresponding neighborhood poverty rate. We wanted to know whether families "bounced" repeatedly between high- and low-poverty neighborhoods during the program, or, once families moved back to a high-poverty area from a low-poverty area, whether they stayed in a similar type of neighborhood over time.

We relied on MTO administrative data to track families' locations at up to five points in time: their initial relocation move, 1997, 2000, 2002, and 2004 (using our Three-City Study data).<sup>7</sup> Next, we categorized neighborhoods by poverty rate levels, based on the 2000 Census: very low (less than 10 percent poor), low (10 to 20 percent), moderate (20 to 40 percent) and high poverty (greater than 40 percent).<sup>8</sup> Finally, we categorized the neighborhood pattern of each MTO mover family, calling these patterns *neighborhood trajectories*.

### Experimental Mover Neighborhood Trajectories

About one-third (31 percent) of the Three-City experimental-mover families that first

relocated to very low or low-poverty neighborhoods remained in the same type of neighborhood over time, whether they moved or not.<sup>9</sup> These households had *consistently low-poverty* trajectories. Almost half (49 percent) the Three-City experimental-mover families had *worsening* neighborhood trajectories; these families left their first MTO neighborhood relatively quickly and remained in much poorer areas over time. Only a tiny share (about 2 percent) of families had inconsistent trajectories, moving from a low-poverty area to a high-poverty area and then back to a low-poverty area.

Our ethnographic data, which include systematic observation and informal interviewing over repeat visits with families, indicated that families with *consistently low-poverty* trajectories differed from other movers in several ways. They seemed to be luckier, on average, when they first moved, finding landlords and good-quality housing units that were more likely to remain affordable and attractive over time. They also expressed particularly strong preferences for "better" areas (defined as safer and more economically diverse than the inner city), and they had more limited family attachments and obligations in inner-city areas. In fact, some had even used the initial relocation to distance or buffer themselves from needy friends or relatives with drug addictions, criminal habits, or other problems.<sup>10</sup> It is not surprising, in that context, that their social lives had "moved with them"—even, in some cases, over multiple moves across a wide geographic area.

These families appeared both satisfied with and well adapted to their new circumstances. For instance, Roxanne, an experimental mover who lost her apartment in a Los Angeles suburb when her landlord opted to sell the property, found out about another "good" neighborhood through a friend. While the new neighborhood was roughly 15 miles away, Roxanne and her family once again centered their lives on the new neighborhood.

The reasons that 49 percent of experimental-mover families had *worsening* neighborhood trajectories were more varied. First, they were less fortunate in the rental market at initial lease-up; this may reflect less successful placement work by

housing counselors, not just unlucky choices by families. Many were drawn back to the inner city because rents priced them out of more attractive neighborhoods or because landlords sold their housing unit or stopped participating in the Housing Choice Voucher program. The families then found acceptable units more readily available in the inner city, even if they searched in “better” areas as well. Some families pursued job or training opportunities in the inner city; if such options were available in and around low-poverty areas, the families were unaware of them. Others moved back primarily because of social obligations to loved ones. Sick or otherwise needy family members loomed large for the most constrained families, whose social lives revolved around relatives and close friends back in the inner city even when the families lived in distant, low-poverty areas.

Though the ethnographic sample sizes are small, families in this group also appear less likely than the *consistently low-poverty trajectory* families to have access to cars. Not having a car was an especially serious problem for the Los Angeles cases, some of whom relied on welfare or had insecure jobs. But it also constrained a transit-reliant family living in a poor section of Staten Island whose family support networks were concentrated in the South Bronx.

There were major site differences in the frequency of these trajectory types, with Boston showing much better results over time than the other two study regions. Seven in 10 Boston Three-City Study experimental-group mover families in our study had *consistently low-poverty* trajectories, compared with only 2 in 10 for New York and 1 in 10 for Los Angeles. These major differences partly result from differences between the metro sites: metro Boston neighborhoods were much less likely to have high concentrations of poor households than metro New York and Los Angeles, and this remained true over time as MTO unfolded. For instance, 90 percent of metro Boston’s neighborhoods had less than 20 percent poverty, compared with 67 percent of metro New York’s neighborhoods and 63 percent of metro Los Angeles’ neighborhoods (for details, see Kingsley and Pettit 2008).

### Section 8 Mover Neighborhood Trajectories

The neighborhood trajectory patterns differed slightly for Section 8 comparison-mover families, as they were not required under MTO to move to low-poverty neighborhoods, nor did they receive special counseling or search assistance. According to our neighborhood trajectory analysis, one-third (33 percent) of the Section 8 sample first moved to high-poverty neighborhoods and remained there over time. We characterize these families as having *consistently high-poverty* neighborhood trajectories. Another quarter of the Three-City Section 8-mover families started off in very low or low-poverty neighborhoods and remained in these communities over time. These families had *consistently low-poverty* neighborhood trajectories. Just 14 percent of the Three-City Section 8 movers had *worsening* trajectories, where they ended up in neighborhoods by 2004 that were poorer than those of their first lease-up; another 14 percent had *improving* trajectories, where they ended up in neighborhoods that had lower poverty rates than those from where they started.

While the sample sizes are too small to come to generalizable conclusions, the neighborhood trajectory analysis highlights an important point: not all MTO experimental families left their low-poverty neighborhoods for high-poverty areas. In fact, approximately one-third of the experimental-mover families and one-quarter of the Section 8-comparison families were able to stay in low-poverty neighborhoods through 2004.

### Why MTO Experimental Families Moved

Embedded in the trajectory patterns are two decisions: whether to move at all and, if so, to what kind of unit and location. For the first decision, according to the interim evaluation, the main reasons experimental families gave for moving after their initial lease-up were problems with their lease (22 percent), conflicts with the landlord (20 percent), and wanting a bigger or better-quality apartment (18 percent). Section 8 comparison-mover families reported that safety issues (23 percent) and

building issues (13 percent) were their leading reasons to move (Orr et al. 2003).

For the Three-City Study, we probed deeper into why families left their initial unit and why they made any subsequent moves; we also added direct observational data to families' reports. Overall, just over one-quarter of the Three-City study families from the experimental and Section 8 comparison groups discussed wanting a bigger or better-quality apartment; almost one-fifth discussed feeling unsafe in their neighborhood; a little more than one-tenth reported life changes that necessitated moves, such as births, sick relatives or deaths, changing jobs, divorce, or a domestic dispute; and less than one-tenth felt restricted by their landlord, by either a lack of privacy or rules that were too restrictive for families with children.<sup>11</sup>

Section 8 comparison-group movers were more likely to cite dissatisfaction with their neighborhood—a lack of safety and sometimes noise or more generally “the wrong environment for my children”—as a main reason for moving. This response was consistent with the Section 8 comparison group's greater exposure to high-poverty areas and with their lower neighborhood satisfaction scores.

Experimental-mover families, on the other hand, were more likely to report dissatisfaction with their housing unit or how the landlord maintained the unit. Substandard physical conditions were a major culprit. Either the family chose to move because it was not satisfied with landlord maintenance and repair, or the unit failed to meet inspection standards set by the housing voucher program. Some families reported health problems related to toxic home environments, such as carbon monoxide poisoning and mold. During our study, we observed serious problems firsthand in some units, such as kitchens overrun with cockroaches and heat that barely functioned in the cold winter.

Another prominent reason the Three-City Study families reported moving was housing market pressures. Almost one-fifth of both the Three-City Study experimental-mover families and Section 8 comparison-mover families discussed leasing problems such as units being sold, rented above the voucher program price ceiling, or removed from the voucher program altogether as

common reasons for moving. These problems were unsurprising; during the MTO experiment, the housing market tightened substantially, limiting the housing choices of MTO families and prompting some involuntary moves.

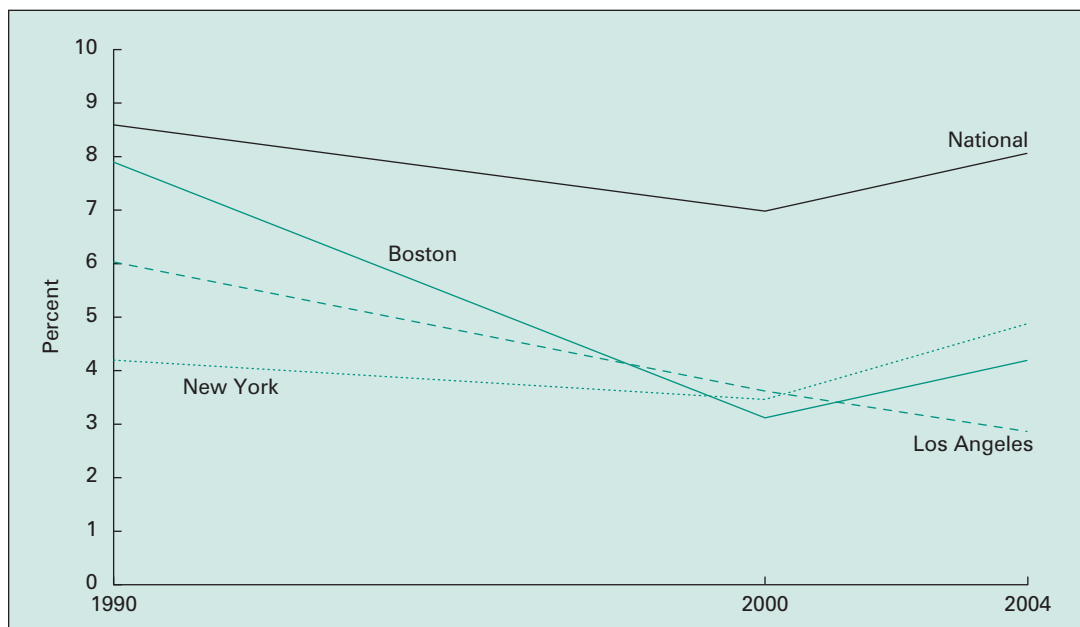
There were notable differences in why families moved across the study sites. New York families talked about *market factors*—landlords selling units or raising rents—prompting them to move twice as often as Boston or Los Angeles families. These factors were especially important for members of the New York experimental-mover group, many of whom leased up initially with small, live-in landlords in multifamily homes. About one-third of Los Angeles families from both treatment groups reported that their *neighborhoods* were unsafe or undesirable, which prompted them to move again. Boston MTO families were more likely to report problems with their *housing unit*, either size or quality, as their motivation to move.

### Tightening Housing Markets

Our three study sites had tight housing markets before MTO began, and these markets remained significantly tighter and costlier than the national average over the course of the MTO demonstration. Some MTO families, especially in New York, made what the Census Bureau terms “involuntary” moves motivated by the changing housing market. In 1990, the national vacancy rate was 8.6 percent, compared with 7.9 percent for Boston, 6 percent for Los Angeles, and 4.2 percent for New York (figure 1).<sup>12</sup> By 2000, vacancy rates had plummeted. Greater Boston, Los Angeles, and New York were among the nation's tightest rental markets, with vacancy rates of about 3 percent each, while the national rate was 7 percent.<sup>13</sup> By 2004, vacancy rates had eased marginally in Boston and New York (to 4.2 percent and 4.9 percent, respectively), while Los Angeles' rate had dropped even further, to 2.9 percent. Fair-market rents (FMRs) in the sites, which are primarily used to determine standard payment amounts for the Housing Choice Voucher program, mirror the vacancy rate trends.<sup>14</sup> Our three sites began and remained very expensive. Los Angeles' FMR was \$897 for two-

*Many Three-City MTO families faced complex choices after initial relocation—including difficult trade-offs among a decent neighborhood, a decent apartment, a job, or reliable free child care from a loved one—while negotiating a tight housing market, landlords with little incentive to get or stay involved with a low-income housing program, and events that complicate all our lives.*

FIGURE 1. Vacancy Rates for Renters in the Three-City Study of MTO Sites



Sources: U.S. Census, 1990 and 2000, and American Community Survey, 2004.

Note: Data are from the county encompassing the central city.

bedroom units in 2000 and increased 33 percent to \$1,189 by 2006. Similarly, Boston's FMR increased from \$1,103 in 2000 to \$1,324 by 2006, a 20 percent increase. New York's FMR increased 7 percent, from \$1,061 in 2000 to \$1,133 by 2006.<sup>15</sup>

The monthly share of household income paid for rent—a standard indicator of hardship—also increased as the MTO experiment unfolded. Households that pay more than 30 percent of their income for rent are considered to experience housing hardship. In 2000, 43 percent of all Boston and New York renters and 46 percent of Los Angeles renters were over that threshold, compared with the national average of 40 percent.<sup>16</sup> By 2004, housing hardship had jumped a stunning 8 percentage points for Los Angeles and New York renters and 1 percentage point for renters in Boston.<sup>17</sup>

### Little Room to Maneuver: Tough Trade-Offs and Decisions

Many Three-City MTO families faced complex choices after their initial relocation, including difficult trade-offs among a decent neighborhood, a decent apartment, a job, or a reliable source of free child care from a loved one. Also, as other researchers have emphasized, looking for decent, safe

housing with a federal rental voucher can be very challenging, especially in tight, costly housing markets (Pendall 2000; Shroder 2002; Pahsup et al. 2005). As we show above, some MTO families faced these difficult searches and decisions several times between the initial lease-up and 2004, when we visited them.

Most parents in our ethnographic sample of experimental movers maintained close ties with family or a small circle of close friends in high-poverty neighborhoods left behind. Some faced changing household needs as the makeup of their households changed. With sick or homeless relatives moving, or a newborn requiring an additional bedroom, these families also emphasized as a priority securing a housing unit with specific features, such as number of bedrooms or a yard. Therefore, these parents weighed the trade-off between location and housing unit quality in various ways, especially if they were not lucky enough, in the initial relocation, to find a decent unit. In moving on, some had more bad luck in the housing market, landing in a poorly maintained unit and needing to move on quickly again or ending up on a block that was more dangerous than it seemed during the search. Trading away a decent neighborhood to get a bigger or better place was not about preferences in the

abstract—indifference to neighborhood conditions, for example—but was problem-solving under tight constraints. Lanelle, an experimental-mover mother in New York, exemplifies a family that made multiple moves for different reasons and weighed difficult making trade-offs at each move (see sidebar).

Each decision to move confronted MTO families with the challenges of finding and leasing up a new unit with the Housing Choice Voucher—a process that became more challenging as vacancy rates dropped in all three metropolitan housing markets studied. Of those families that talked specifically about their experiences using the voucher, more than half felt that their voucher limited where they could find viable units, especially in less-poor neighborhoods.<sup>18</sup> Approximately one-quarter of the families talked about the challenges of finding a landlord who would accept vouchers (which include landlords turning away families with children), particularly in better-quality neighborhoods; less than one-quarter of the families discussed disliking the neighborhoods where many of the units available to voucher holders were clustered, whether the neighborhood was too far from family, too far from work, or too unsafe. A small number of families talked about the poor quality of available units and the challenges in getting apartments to pass the voucher program inspection.

MTO parents expressed surprise and relief when landlords in neighborhoods perceived as much “better” accepted their vouchers. But sometimes, this called for extraordinary persistence. Consider Tameka, an experimental complier in greater Los Angeles who initially relocated

to a low-poverty neighborhood in the suburbs that she liked very much. When the landlord stopped accepting housing vouchers, she was forced to find a new apartment, and this drove her back to the central city (and into a higher-poverty neighborhood), though she looked hard in the suburbs too. With a great deal of effort, she found a house in Los Angeles that she liked, but she had to help the landlord prepare the unit to pass the required inspection.

Families in our study also talked about their increased reliance on real estate brokers, who had played a significant role in the initial lease-up at some MTO sites as housing markets tightened. Families with limited time, money, transportation, and other resources for housing search had ample reason to turn to brokers with reliable lists of willing landlords. MTO families told us it was better than relying on outdated lists provided by local public housing agencies or scanning the classifieds and contacting landlords one by one. Though MTO offered no formal post-relocation counseling, brokers acted as de facto housing counselors, sometimes making families’ housing searches more efficient and, at the same time, shaping which neighborhoods were considered. We are unable to say, relative to a hypothetical scenario that does not include brokers, whether they expanded (in favorable ways) the range of neighborhoods families considered or narrowed that range (for example, to the areas and landlords with which the agents were most familiar). Based on prior studies, an unassisted search by rental voucher holders is usually a limited search. But the undeniable lesson is that some MTO families were

Lanelle enjoyed the neighborhood she first moved to during the MTO program—a low-poverty area in the Northeast Bronx. She chose the neighborhood based on a teacher’s recommendation of a strong elementary school there. But a series of factors prompted her to move: the heat did not work for two weeks in the winter and Lanelle got sick, the housing authority refused to pay the landlord, and Lanelle and her children were evicted. After a brief spell living with her grown son, they found a new place with a great landlord in a moderately poor

area. But Lanelle’s health problems made the fourth floor walk-up apartment untenable. Through her stepfather, Lanelle learned about a good building near Yankee Stadium in the South Bronx, and several relatives moved into the building. Though the area is poorer and noisier than the Northeast Bronx, and though no one in the family will walk alone there at night, it offers many nearby amenities, such as shopping, the subway, and the youngest daughter’s school. Lanelle’s family and friends are also nearby.

assisted and “steered” by real estate professionals long after the program’s initial intervention.

### How Social Ties and Familiar Institutions Matter

Earlier research on relocation with vouchers has underlined proximity to relatives, friends, and services as a common priority in neighborhood choice (Varady 2003), and research on how families cope in distressed areas has frequently emphasized the importance of having such social support near at hand (Venkatesh 2000). These factors have led some critics of MTO to suggest that families moved back to distressed neighborhoods, after having escaped such areas, because of a lack of social support or feelings of social isolation (e.g., Venkatesh 2000; Garshick Kleit 2001; Greenbaum 2006). In other words, after the one-year requirement, this line of reasoning suggests that MTO experimental movers would be eager to move back near social supports and familiar neighborhood institutions they left behind. Our data, which belie that simple story, point to a range of ways that family and familiarity are considered when “moving on again.”

Some participants prioritized proximity to loved ones or cherished institutions, such as a church. But only about 10 percent of our interview sample moved back to inner-city neighborhoods for these reasons, and most of these families were from Los Angeles, where families moved much farther on average (in the initial relocation) and where public transportation is famously inadequate. There was also the opposite extreme: families that used vouchers to distance themselves from needy or risk-bearing relatives and friends, including those with a criminal past, no housing, no steady work, or an addiction problem. Finally, some families considered proximity to important social ties (less often to familiar services) but did not make it a priority when deciding where to live. These families appear to have adapted better, whether because they had more resources under their own roofs, economic opportunities worked out (not necessarily in the new neighborhood), or for some other reason. In general, the residential locations of MTO mover families’ most

important social ties appear much more important for shaping *daily routines* (socializing and commuting patterns, for example) and *neighborhood satisfaction* than either triggering moves or channeling experimental movers back to inner-city neighborhoods.

### Major Lessons and Policy Implications

Our results, building on the findings from the MTO Interim Impacts Evaluation, show that the challenge very low income families face when they try to stay in low-poverty neighborhoods, not just get to them, is not a simple story about preferring familiar, if distressed, inner-city environments. Instead, that challenge reflects the tough decisions that confront these families as they juggle preferences that are often simultaneously unattainable (a bigger apartment, stable rent, and/or safer neighborhood) while negotiating a tight housing market, landlords who have little incentive to get or stay involved with a low-income housing program, and events that complicate all our lives, such as divorce, job loss, and illness. The less stably housed the family, the more this was true—because each new move forced the family to navigate anew, with little room to maneuver in the choice of best-possible neighborhoods. This appears to have contributed to many downward trajectories that led experimental movers to relocate to poorer neighborhoods and continue to rent in that type of neighborhood over time.

At least in tight markets, a relocation-only intervention will not be enough. What the nation needs is a reinvigorated supply-side strategy, focused on inclusion of affordable housing in nondistressed areas—communities with low crime rates and, if possible, strong schools and economic vitality. Beyond the bricks-and-mortar element of supply (“hard units”), the *effective* supply for the voucher program is a function of the enforcement of unit quality standards and landlord willingness to accept vouchers, which in turn hinges on effective outreach and responsive payments. It is vital that assisted relocation not be thought of as simply a matter of counseling, more generous pay-



ment levels, or geographic restrictions on vouchers.

Wider landlord participation demands that responsive agencies manage the voucher program. To ensure the availability of landlords in low-poverty neighborhoods, housing agencies need to search on behalf of families in order to expand families' neighborhood options (as Gautreaux placement agents did in the program's first wave), and then work with landlords to ensure that decent, leased units will remain affordable and in compliance as long as possible. When recipients of housing assistance are unable to remain in their current units, housing agencies should offer more relocation counseling. Private rental brokers are already a part of this process, but there has been little systematic attention to their role, and how to make the most of it, in policy debates.

These improvements need not deny families the opportunity to lease up where they want to elsewhere. But, they would put the onus of the arduous search task in the most competitive markets on the agencies offering the housing assistance, which too often fails to live up to national policy declarations about the importance of a "suitable living environment" for all American families.

Next is the question of how to mitigate difficult trade-offs. Where they had a meaningful choice to make, some MTO parents were willing to trade away attractive unit features (including size and quality) to stay in a better neighborhood. Others, particularly if they had had to endure the worst of the dilapidated and poorly maintained housing stock in the voucher program, did not make the same choice. They preferred a better apartment in a risky environment, and they were willing to manage the risks. Access to loved ones also was a factor, especially for working parents with no good child care alternatives.

A key policy implication of this finding is that "car vouchers" or other transportation strategies could mitigate the trade-off between living in a safer neighborhood and having the desired level of access to one's social supports and cherished institutions. This is one element of what some have called a next-generation, "mobility plus" approach that would integrate hard-

won lessons from MTO with important lessons from other rigorously evaluated demonstration programs about effective job supports and family strengthening services (see Keels et al. 2005; Turner and Briggs 2008).

Our policy recommendations suggest specific ways to make the Housing Choice Voucher program and complementary housing policy strategies work more effectively, so families that escape dangerous and distressed inner-city neighborhoods can stay out of those areas if they so choose.

## Notes

1. Almost all MTO participants came from public housing developments: 90 percent came from public housing and 10 percent from assisted housing, such as project-based Section 8 buildings. Therefore, we use the term "public housing" to refer to the neighborhoods where families originally lived.
2. While experimental treatment group families were required to lease up in census tracts with less than 10 percent poverty according to the 1990 Census, only 89 percent of the experimental-mover families met this requirement; 94 percent of the experimental-group families leased up in neighborhoods with less than 11 percent poverty (Orr et al. 2003). HUD granted a small number of waivers to experimental-group families in special circumstances to move to higher-poverty neighborhoods, explaining why 6 percent of the experimental movers leased up in neighborhoods with greater than 11 percent poverty (Orr et al. 2003).
3. Another research team conducted qualitative research in the remaining two MTO sites (Chicago and Baltimore). See, for example, Clampet-Lundquist and colleagues (2006).
4. We limit this policy brief to experimental-group and Section 8 comparison-group movers, though our study also includes nonmovers and control-group members.
5. The shares of experimental-mover families were slightly higher using the 1990 Census because many census tracts grew poorer between 1990 and 2000: 98 percent of the experimental movers lived in neighborhoods with less than 20 percent poverty and 89 percent lived in neighborhoods with less than 10 percent poverty.
6. We intentionally oversampled the number of experimental movers. Of the 122 households in the Three-City Study sample, 55 households were experimental movers and 21 were Section 8 movers.
7. We included all five points in time that geographic information was available, even if data for a family were missing from a particular year. The data from 1997 and 2000 were from adminis-

trative canvasses, and many families were missing data from one of these two years. For instance, two-thirds of the Section 8 subsample was missing at least one data point, and 56 percent of the experimental-mover group was missing the same. Still, most families had either 1997 or 2000 data.

8. This one-census approach removes neighborhood change as a source of variation from the patterns, leaving only residential mobility.
9. In addition to analyzing the Three-City Study sample, we analyzed the neighborhood trajectories of the MTO Interim Impacts Evaluation sample. While the shares of experimental movers and Section 8 comparison movers from the interim evaluation differed slightly from the Three-City study sample, the patterns were the same.
10. We caution that these distinctions are based on the ethnographic sample of 28 experimental compliers, which included an oversample of those who were living in suburban areas.
11. In our analysis, we included all reasons for why households moved; we did not report a main or prominent reason.
12. Data are from the 1990 U.S. Census. The vacancy rates are for the county containing the central city.
13. Data are from the 2006 American Community Survey.
14. HUD annually estimates fair-market rents for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. The FMR is set at the 40th percentile rent of standard quality units, indicating that 40 percent of housing rented for less than the FMR. The FMR data discussed in this brief are for two-bedroom units. The geographies are FMR HUD areas, which are similar to the three sites' metropolitan areas. These FMRs are inflation-adjusted to 2006 dollars.
15. FMR data are from the "FMR HUD History 1983–2006," HUD User web site.
16. Data are from the 2000 U.S. Census. The housing hardship data are for the county containing the central city.
17. Data are from the 2004 American Community Survey.
18. Fifty-four families talked about their experiences using their vouchers, or 44 percent of the Three-City Study household sample. Thirty-one families identified problems using their vouchers in affluent neighborhoods.

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## The Moving to Opportunity Demonstration

In 1994, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched the Moving to Opportunity Demonstration (MTO) in 1994 in five metropolitan areas: Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. MTO was a voluntary relocation program for very low income residents of public and assisted housing located in high-poverty neighborhoods in these cities. Those who volunteered were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups: a control group (families retained their public housing unit, but received no new assistance); a Section 8 comparison group (families received the standard counseling and a voucher subsidy for use in the private housing market); or an experimental group. The experimental group families received special relocation counseling (focused on opportunities to live in low-poverty areas) and search assistance. They also received a voucher usable only in a low-poverty neighborhood (less than 10 percent poor as of the 1990 Census), with the requirement that the family live there for at least one year.

Of the 1,820 families assigned to the experimental group, just under half (48 percent, or 860) found a willing landlord with a suitable rental unit and moved successfully or “leased up”; they were experimental “complier” families. The MTO Interim Impacts Evaluation—conducted in 2002, approximately five to seven years after families relocated—found that many experimental group families had moved again, some of them several times—and many moved out of their low-poverty neighborhoods. In addition, about 70 percent of the control group had moved out of public housing, mostly to other poor urban neighborhoods. Families in the MTO experimental group, however, were still much more likely to be living in low-poverty areas (whether the original placement areas or other areas) than their Section 8 voucher or control family counterparts. MTO families also had lived for longer periods in such areas than families in the other two groups.

## The Three-City Study of MTO

The Three-City Study of MTO is a large-scale, mixed-method study focused on three MTO sites: Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. The study was designed to examine key puzzles that emerged in previous MTO research, including the Interim Evaluation, and combines analysis of MTO survey, census, and neighborhood indicator data with new, qualitative data collection. The family-level data were collected in 2004 and 2005—about 6 to 10 years after families’ initial placement through the MTO program and 2 years after the Interim Evaluation data collection. First, we randomly selected 122 families, conducting 276 semistructured, in-depth qualitative interviews with parents, adolescents, and young adults in all three treatment groups. We included compliers (those who successfully moved at the outset) and noncompliers (those who did not move through the program) in the experimental and comparison groups, although we weighted compliers more heavily. Overall, we conducted 81 interviews in Boston, 120 in Los Angeles, and 75 in New York. The combined cooperation rate (consents as a share of eligible households contacted) was 80 percent. Next, we launched “family-focused” ethnographic fieldwork, visiting a subset of 39 control group and experimental-complier families repeatedly over six to eight months. The cooperation rate for the ethnographic subsample was 70 percent.

The Three-City Study of MTO is housed at the Urban Institute. The principal investigators are Xavier de Souza Briggs of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Susan Popkin of the Urban Institute, and John Goering of the City University of New York. The study is funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Annie E. Casey, Fannie Mae, Rockefeller, Smith-Richardson, and William T. Grant Foundations.

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