

New Findings on the Benefits and Limitations of Assisted Housing Mobility

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The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) demonstration in 1994 in five cities: Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. MTO targeted families living in some of the nation's poorest, highest-crime communities-distressed public housing-and used housing subsidies to offer them a chance to move to lower-poverty neighborhoods. MTO was a unique effort to try to improve the life chances of these very poor families by helping them leave the disadvantaged environments that contribute to poor outcomes like dropping out of high school, disconnection from the labor market, teen pregnancy, and delinquency. The hope was that moving would provide these families with access to communities that offered better schools, economic opportunities, and city services, such as police, parks, libraries, and sanitation. Further, policymakers and researchers had the research-based expectation that living in these better neighborhoods might lead to higher employment rates for parents and better school outcomes for children and youth.

Families that volunteered for MTO were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups: a control group (families retained their public housing unit and received no new assistance), a Section 8 comparison group (families received the standard counseling and voucher subsidy for use in the private market), or an experimental group, which 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 a 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."

Follow-up research on the MTO families was conducted in 2002, about five years after they had moved (Orr et al. 2003). The findings from this research were surprising and generated a great deal of controversy. First, the research showed that many families that initially succeeded in moving to low poverty areas did not stay there; although relatively few went back to their original neighborhoods, a substantial proportion had moved to other poor communities. Second, the follow-up showed no overall impact on employment or educational outcomes, although there were some employment gains for younger adults and in specific sites. Third, there were unexpected positive impacts on physical and mental health for adult women and adolescent girls, including lower levels of obesity for the experimental group and reduced depression and anxiety for both experimental and Section 8 comparison group movers. And, finally, most puzzling, adolescent girls seemed to have benefited in important ways (improved mental health and reduced delinquency) from moving to better neighborhoods, while adolescent boys seemed to have not benefited at all.

The Three-City Study of MTO, a large-scale, mixed-method study, was designed to examine these key puzzles that had emerged from the follow-up research on MTO families. The study combined qualitative interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and analysis of census and administrative data and was conducted in three of the five MTO sites: Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. The interviews and ethnographic fieldwork took place in 2004 and 2005, about 6 to 10 years after families' initial placement through the MTO program.

Findings from the Three-City Study highlight the complexity of the MTO experience and the limitations of a relocation-only strategy in being able to bring about fundamental changes in the lives of very low income families. First, the research highlights the ways the rental market affected this housing-based intervention and played a key role in determining trajectories for MTO families. While experimental movers initially got to neighborhoods that were considerably less poor and substantially safer than the public housing developments from which they moved, many of these neighborhoods were transitional, and became poorer over time (Kingsley and Pettit 2008). Further, housing markets tightened dramatically in all three sites, driving up rents-especially in Los Angeles-and forcing some families to move from low- to higher-poverty areas to find affordable housing.

In addition to the changing rental markets, the Three-City Study highlights other factors that led MTO families

to choose to make subsequent moves to higher-poverty communities (Comey, Briggs, and Weismann 2008). Looking for decent, safe housing with a federal rental voucher can be very challenging, especially in tight, costly housing markets. Our qualitative fieldwork indicates that many MTO families faced complex choices about housing after their initial relocation, including making difficult trade-offs among having a decent neighborhood, a decent (and affordable) apartment, a job, or a reliable source of free child care from a loved one.

The Three-City MTO research also helps illuminate the lack of improvements in educational and employment outcomes. The follow-up research on MTO in 2002 showed that even when families moved to safer, lower-poverty communities, they often remained within the same large urban school district, which may have limited their opportunities. Qualitative fieldwork from the Three-City Study suggests that even when families did move to areas that offered a range of educational options, parents often lacked information about how to make effective choices to get their children into high quality schools; many focused on safety and order rather than academic success (Ferryman et al. 2008).

Our findings on employment are similar: analysis of data on the location of low-wage jobs shows that moving to lower-poverty communities did not necessarily improve MTO participants' access to employment opportunities. For some families, relocating to lower-poverty areas meant leaving behind a dense concentration of low-wage jobs for areas with fewer nearby jobs and little public transportation. Also, MTO movers did not "convert" new locations into social capital, such as useful new job networks, in part because few of them participated in community institutions, but also because their social worlds remain centered on family or close friends in other neighborhoods. Further, many participants faced barriers that MTO's relocation-only strategy could not address, such as serious physical or mental health challenges that impeded their ability to work. However, relocating to very different environments did seem to enable some youth to build much more diverse friendship networks and a broader repertoire of "soft skills" that they perceive to be important for upward mobility. (Cove et al. 2008).

Finally, the Three-City Study provides a powerful explanation for the puzzling findings about why adolescent girls who moved to lower-poverty communities seem to have benefited in important ways, while adolescent boys seem not to have benefited at all. Our qualitative investigation suggests that the dramatic differences in neighborhood social organization and safety are behind the positive effects for girls. In particular, girls seem to have benefited from a reduction in "the female fear"-the fear of sexual victimization, verbal and physical harassment, and sexual exploitation. Girls in all types of communities experience at least some verbal and physical harassment, but in the socially isolated world of distressed public housing, the pressures for sexual activity are much greater, the threats more blatant, and the risk of assault very real. Findings from the Three-City study suggest that it is the reduction of these gender-specific threats that has so benefited MTO girls who moved to lower-poverty neighborhoods (Popkin, Leventhal, and Weismann 2008).

The Three-City Study of MTO also suggests new directions for research and policy-in particular, the need for more long-term research on the longer-range effects of mobility. For example, are the benefits for girls sustained over time and do they affect decisions around child bearing, family formation, and employment? The study also suggests the need for more in-depth research on the specific risks more likely to affect girls; improving our understanding of these mechanisms will illuminate the complex processes that lead to poor outcomes for both male and female children in high-poverty neighborhoods.

The study's findings also highlight the limitations of a relocation-only strategy and underscore the need for more comprehensive approaches to help assisted mobility efforts achieve their full potential (Turner and Briggs 2008). In particular, mobility programs must do more than help participants move. Helping families stay in better neighborhoods is as important as helping them get there in the first place. Any new mobility efforts must include long-term supports to help families stay in the types of neighborhoods with environments that enable children and adolescents to thrive. These include long-term follow-up support and assistance in negotiating the private market and in dealing with landlords, as well as support in making connections to institutions in the new community.

Another important lesson from MTO thus far is that defining "opportunity neighborhoods" as census tracts that were less than 10 percent poor in 1990 was not sufficient to get families to communities that offered real opportunities-high-performing schools and access to jobs. If policymakers seek to use housing assistance to significantly expand opportunity, they should directly target resource-rich communities with high-performing schools and good job markets and not simply rely on the poverty rate as a proxy measure. Since high-performing school districts are often primarily white, this targeting strategy means directly confronting exclusion and discrimination in the siting of affordable housing and the placement of families who use rental housing vouchers or other assistance.

Finally, the lack of affordable housing in resource-rich neighborhoods continues to powerfully limit the opportunities available to low-income families. Policies to expand the supply of rental housing that is and remains affordable for low- and moderate-income families are crucial if assisted-housing mobility programs are to succeed in improving the life chances for poor families.

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Project Page: [Three-City Study of the Moving to Opportunity program](#)

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