



The short- and long-term effects of life events on residential mobility



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ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine how life events impact inter-neighborhood residential mobility among a cohort of young adults from the United States. We combine choice-based models of mobility with life-course principles to argue that life events associated with the transition to adulthood should be associated with residential mobility in the short-term, but residential stability in the long-term. Unanticipated and disruptive events, on the other hand, are expected to place individuals on a long-term trajectory of residential instability. Longitudinal survey data covering nearly 30 years allows us to capture short-term effects, average effects, and trends across time. We find particularly strong short-term effects on mobility for marriage and homeownership, both of which subsequently lead to long-term stability. We also find that divorce and incarceration (an emerging turning point in the life-course) predict instability in both the short- and long-term. Additional analyses suggest that some events – like homeownership – are immediately stabilizing, while others – like marriage – lead to stability across time. We conclude by discussing the contributions of the findings to our understanding of residential mobility and the transition to adulthood in the contemporary United States.

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1. Introduction

Each year approximately 15% of Americans make a residential move (Lee & Hall, 2009). Mobility is not a random occurrence, but rather often the result of individual and household characteristics that change the definition of housing needs. For many individuals, then, the decision to move is entirely voluntary, and traditional explanations cast mobility decisions in terms of satisfaction with the current dwelling relative to other housing wants and needs (Landale & Guest, 1985; Rossi, 1980; Speare, Goldstein, & Frey, 1975). But not all mobility is voluntary, and many perfectly satisfied individuals are forced or compelled to move each year (Clark & Withers, 2008). Disadvantaged and marginalized portions of the population are especially vulnerable to push factors that create unanticipated mobility (Lee, 1978). Thus, while many Americans are “ever more rooted,” a portion of the population is more appropriately characterized as residentially unstable (Fischer, 2002).

The current study follows a cohort of young-adults across nearly 30 years to investigate whether and how certain life events

promote residential stability and instability across the life-course. Behind many moves are important life events and turning points, including marriage, childbearing, and homeownership. Such events are generally considered part of the transition to adulthood in American society (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McCloy, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004; Hogan & Astone, 1986; Settersten & Hagestad, 2006; Shanahan, 2000). But these are not the sole determinants of mobility, as unanticipated events, such as divorce, are also correlated with a change of address (see Clark & Onaka, 1983; Mulder & Wagner, 2010). We define mobility – both conceptually and empirically – as a change of address that takes an individual across a census tract boundary while remaining in the same county (Clark, 1986; Fischer, 2002; Lee & Hall, 2009; Rossi, 1980). This is consistent with the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of residential mobility as intra-county movement, or what others have termed inter-neighborhood mobility (Crowder, South, & Chavez, 2006; South, Crowder, & Pais, 2008). Conventionally, internal migration has been conceptualized as distinct from local residential movement in that inter-county or long-distance moves are often triggered by events such as job relocations or attending college (Long, 1988; Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999; Stoll, 2013). Indeed in recent years, and spurred on in part by the Great Recession, the rate of long-range migrations has been on the decline while the rate of local moves has been on the rise. Within-county moves hovered around 60% of all residential moves between 1980 and 2000, but

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the rate of local moves rose precipitously to a share of almost 75% by 2010 (Stoll, 2013).

This article joins a growing body of research that places residential mobility within the life-course perspective. In doing so, we make three primary contributions. First, we consider the separate short- and long-term effects of a variety of life events on residential mobility. This adds nuance to our understanding of how the timing and duration of life events impact the decision to stay or move locally. Second, our focus on events that create both anticipated and unanticipated mobility provides a better understanding of how some events set a long-term course of residential instability. That is, some moves perpetuate the housing disequilibrium created by unanticipated events (Coulter & van Ham, 2013). Finally, our use of longitudinal data from the United States allow us to follow individual trajectories of residential mobility across nearly 30 years of observation. We can therefore capture the shifting propensities to move by individuals during and following the transition into adulthood. We start by first outlining the choice-based (or life-cycle) residential decision-making model that has informed a wealth of mobility research. Following the lead of others (e.g., Clark & Withers, 2008; Coulter & van Ham, 2013; Feijten, 2005; Geist & McManus, 2008; Kulu & Milewski, 2008), we adopt principles of the life-course perspective to more explicitly detail how different events might have divergent short- and long-term associations with residential mobility. After overviewing the data and analytic strategy, we present a series of models predicting the probability of moving based on various transitions and trajectories.

1.1. Life events and residential mobility

Residential mobility has traditionally been explained as a rational choice process driven by residential stress or satisfaction (Rossi, 1980; Speare et al., 1975). This explanation can be traced back to Rossi (1980), who argued that mobility is the response to needs generated when life-cycle changes create shifts in family composition. The residential mobility process begins when something triggers an increase in housing dissatisfaction or (less commonly) when individuals are forced to leave their current residence. If residential dissatisfaction, or disequilibrium, crosses an individual's threshold, a search for alternatives is likely to follow (Speare et al., 1975). Once an individual has expressed a desire to move, he or she evaluates both the feasibility and urgency of undertaking a move; those who perceive a potential move as both feasible and urgent are more likely to convert their mobility intentions into actions (Coulter, 2013). Most moves tend to be short-distance – often beginning and ending in the same neighborhood or no more than a few miles away – because people are more aware of housing options in close proximity (Lee & Hall, 2009), and because moving long distance is significantly more costly than staying local (Roseman, 1971). If, during the search process, a more suitable housing situation emerges, then the likelihood of a move rises. Minus better alternatives, individuals may attempt to relieve their dissatisfaction in alternative ways. For example, homeowners desiring a larger house may consider building an extension to the current household. Alternatively, people can revise their threshold of housing dissatisfaction such that their housing expectations become more closely aligned with their current dwelling (Speare, 1974).

Chief among the correlates of mobility are individual and household characteristics tied to important life events that change the definition of housing needs and create dissatisfaction with the current dwelling (Landale & Guest, 1985; Lee & Hall, 2009; Rossi, 1980; Speare et al., 1975). Rossi (1980), for instance, argued that the decision to move is primarily a function of changes in family composition as an individual goes through various life-cycle

stages. It is no surprise, then, that some of the strongest predictors of mobility include getting married, buying a home, having a child, completing an education, and transitioning into full-time employment (Clark, 1986; Feijten & Mulder, 2002; Kulu, 2008; Michielin & Mulder, 2008; Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999; Rossi, 1980; South & Deane, 1993; Speare, 1974). These transitions alter an individual's needs and preferences for housing, which in turn raise levels of residential dissatisfaction and “trigger” the residential mobility process.

One critique of this model is an underlying assumption that individuals move through the life-course in an orderly fashion. This ignores considerable variation in the timing and pattern of key family and household events (Geist & McManus, 2008). A more attractive alternative to “straight-line” views of residential mobility is an approach grounded in the life-course perspective, which emphasizes diversity in the timing of events over the life span (Clark, Deurloo, and Dieleman 2003; Kendig, 1984). As outlined by Elder (1985, 1994, 1998), we can conceptualize the life-course as a series of interconnected pathways that a person goes through as he or she ages. This approach encourages us to examine residential mobility (or any number of outcomes) in the context of individual life-course transitions and trajectories. These two concepts are central in life-course dynamics research, highlighting the importance of both short- and long-term patterns of behavior. Trajectories capture long-term dynamics, and refer to lifelines or pathways that unfold over the life span such as marriage, parenthood, and work life (Elder, 1985). Trajectories are redirected in important ways by specific turning-points, or transitions (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Transitions are always – and necessarily – embedded in the specific trajectories that give them meaning (Elder, 1985). Across time, series of transitions give the form and structure to the larger trajectories. The trajectory of a marriage, for example, is not possible without first making the transition from unmarried to married.

Indeed, one of the reasons there is such a strong association between age and mobility is that life-course transitions tend to be age-graded. Rates of mobility are highest in the young adult years, and typically start to decline in the early- and mid-30s. Age is so strongly tied to mobility because the young adult years are often typified by important life events such as homeownership, college attendance and completion, and marriage (South & Deane, 1993). These abrupt life events change the definition of household needs fairly quickly. In the traditional framework, such changes lead to increases in dissatisfaction above an individual's threshold, and the growing dissatisfaction triggers relocations.

The life-course perspective also aligns rather closely with the traditional decision-making model of residential mobility (see Rossi, 1980). For example, one fundamental concept in the life-course perspective is the importance of human agency in decision-making (Elder, 1998). Most moves are also said to be voluntary and based on purposive decisions and actions (Rossi, 1980; Speare, 1974). Furthermore, just as moves are constrained by the nature of an individual's awareness space, human agency in the life-course is shaped by the opportunities and constraints of historical time and an individual's social circumstances (Elder, 1994). Thus, it is not just individual-level resources and restrictions that matter, as moves are also shaped by structural opportunities and constraints such as the local housing and labor markets (Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999). In the present context, it is useful to conceptualize individuals as moving through the life-course on a certain trajectory of mobility. Specific life events (or transitions) then redirect the mobility trajectory in the short-term, either making a move more or less likely. Some have conceptualized this process as a housing career, where each step in an individual's “career” brings one closer to the dwelling that best meets housing needs and aspirations (Clark, Deurloo, & Dieleman, 2003; Kendig, 1984).

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