



## Residential Instability Among Low-Income Families: A Concept Analysis



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### ABSTRACT

Residential instability is relatively common among low-income families and is associated with a host of negative outcomes, especially for children and adolescents. Psychiatric nurses, especially those in the advanced practice role, observe the consequences of residential instability within the clinical setting. Yet, to-date, the concept is somewhat vague and its essential meaning and definition remain unclear. The aim of this paper is to develop a definition of residential instability using Wilson's method of concept analysis. An overview of historical perspectives is included. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research and application within clinical practice.

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Difficulties securing and maintaining adequate housing in preferred neighborhoods are relatively common among low-income families. This is reflected in the clinical setting where it is not unusual to see school age children with histories of multiple residential changes experiencing the ripple of effects that ensue from parental loss of employment, unit deterioration, and escalating neighborhood violence. As a consequence, residential instability is associated with a host of adverse outcomes. The potential for disrupted peer relationships, adjustment problems and academic difficulties is serious. The commitment within nursing practice to provide holistic care with attention to the physical, psychological, and environmental domains confirms the need to clearly define and contextualize residential instability as a potential barrier to health and healing. This is particularly important for psychiatric nurses serving children and families within the advanced practice role. Yet, to-date, the concept of residential instability is somewhat vague as various terms are used to refer to this phenomenon and its essential meaning and definition remain unclear. The purpose of this article is to develop a definition of residential instability based on an extensive review of multidisciplinary literature and the use of Wilson's concept analysis technique. Additionally, influencing factors and potential consequences of residential instability will be identified. The paper will end with a discussion of the potential implications for clinical practice.

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The place, context, and tenure where one resides are deeply embedded within sociological and culture spheres. Developing a definition of residential instability requires attention to these shifting historical currents.

Nomadic cultures have existed for centuries with impermanence of location an identifying characteristic of life and community. Traditional residentially-stable communities, such that populated medieval Europe, were marked by strong kinship and community ties (Oishi, 2010). Referencing the German philosopher and sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies's description of *gemeinschaft* (a non-mobile, traditional community) and *gesellschaft* (a modern, mobile community), Oishi (2010) explores this historical turning point as a shift from the relatively unchanging village life to the modern-day industrialized community with an increased emphasis on obtainment of individual goals and wishes. This sociological shift ripened communities for transience.

Residential mobility was eventually viewed as a contributor to social deviancy. Sociologists Shaw and McKay (1942) explored the role of residential mobility as a contributor to crime and deviant behavior. This ideology culminated in an effort to distinguish causal links between higher rates of residential mobility and unwanted social outcomes. However, this trajectory changed in 1955, when Rossi published his now famous book, "Why families move: a study in the social psychology of urban residential mobility." Residential mobility was then viewed as a typical response to life-stage events with the intent to increase satisfaction under dynamic contextual circumstances (Rossi, 1955).

Within this new scholarly trajectory, researchers attempted to describe models of migratory patterns, motivation, and predictors for moving (Walport, 1965). These early studies examined variables such as renter vs home-owner status and life cycle transitions (Spear, 1970). Spear (1974) applied the stress-threshold model to describe mobility as a response to environmental stress or dissatisfaction, positing that amenities and location such as size of home and yard, as well as distance from school, shopping, etc. were examples of driving forces behind residential change. This ideological framework assumed that opportunity-seeking behavior is the driving factor behind most residential mobility. The population moves to secure a higher-wage position or improve quality of life (Cadwallader, 1992; Cushing, 1999).

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As a result of this change in perspective, the majority of research on this topic reflects the experiences of the nuclear family. Yet this narrow focus omits relevant considerations. “Military families,” for example, illustrate atypical mobility patterns, moving as often as once every three years (Kelley, Finkel, & Ashby, 2003). Yet research exploring outcomes on military children has produced mixed findings. Several researchers found that frequent mobility creates more difficulties with academics and psychosocial domains while other researchers found that mobility promoted adaptation and appreciation for other cultures (Jeffreys et al., 1997; Kelley et al., 2003).

In spite of a century-long research interest, the contextual reasons that perpetuate residential instability for low-income, resource-constrained families have been largely overlooked. Building deterioration, eviction, financial hardship, and/or neighborhood violence reflect the contextual circumstances and external forces that precede moving (Bartlett, 1997; DeLuca, Rosenblatt, & Wood, 2013; Schafft, 2006). More recently, DeLuca et al. (2013) described the context of residential movement patterns among poor African Americans by reporting the contingent circumstances that motivate relocation, defined by the authors as reactive mobility. Unit failure was attributed to more than 25 % of all relocations and more than 80% of the population had moved for reasons beyond their control (DeLuca et al., 2013). Defined as an unexpected move, responsive moving typically necessitates a hasty selection of an alternative, affordable residence. This pattern often perpetuates neighborhood churning, defined as the phenomenon of families moving short distances for minimal gain. These families typically do not gain an improvement in amenities or increased satisfaction with housing or neighborhood (Coulton, Theodos, & Turner, 2012).

Residential instability as a phenomenon impacting low-income families challenges the more traditional understanding of residential movement as opportunity-seeking behavior. This shifting landscape exposes it as a concept that is inadequately defined in spite of its ubiquity.

## RESIDENTIAL INSTABILITY: CURRENT USES AND DEFINITIONS OF THE CONCEPT

The concept of residential instability is commonly encountered yet the meaning is frequently taken for granted. Terminology applied to this phenomenon includes a broad range of surrogate terms. Terms such as housing instability (Reid, Vittinghoff, & Kushel, 2008), churning movers (Coulton et al., 2012) high residential mobility (Herbers et al., 2012), and hyper-mobility (Cohen & Wadrip, 2011), refer to an atypically higher rate of occurrence. Other researchers choose more neutral terms such as residential mobility (Coulton et al., 2012; Jelleyman & Spencer, 2008; Oishi, 2010; Parente & Mahoney, 2009; Roy, McCoy, & Raver, 2014; Schafft, 2006; South & Haynie, 2004) or school mobility (Carson, Esbensen, & Taylor, 2013; Herbers, Reynolds, & Chin, 2013; Ream, 2005; South & Haynie, 2004) to describe rates of residential relocation.

Housing instability and the above related terms capture various ways of describing and measuring the frequency of changes in residence without providing a definition of the concept itself. Most commonly, frequency of residential changes within a determined time frame is used without any reference to an existing definition of the phenomenon being measured. The exact number of moves indicating instability varies and depends on the research design. Walls (2003) and Black (2006) defined highly mobile students as those who changed residences six times from kindergarten through 12th grade. Other studies have defined housing instability as greater than three moves over the child’s lifetime (Ziol-Guest & McKenna, 2014). In such cases, residential instability is defined a priori as a numerical value, when the context of the move is unknown.

Several authors have defined residential instability within the larger concept of homelessness. Herbers et al. (2012) defined homelessness and high residential mobility as “living in a nonpermanent residence (e.g. shelter, hotel), on the street, in an abandoned building or other

inadequate accommodation, doubled up with friends and family because they could not find or afford housing, or due to frequent changes of residence.” Ma, Gee, and Kushel (2008) created a 3-level variable to describe the housing status of participants in their study: 1) “housing stability” 2) “housing instability without being doubled up” and 3) “housing instability with being doubled up” (Ma et al., 2008). Similarly, Frederick, Chwalek, Hughes, Karabanow, and Kidd (2014) define housing stability as a spectrum of access: At one end of the spectrum is “complete stability,” defined as “access to housing of reasonable quality in the absence of threats.” At the other end is the extreme form of “complete instability” and is defined as “no access to housing of reasonable quality.” These measurements attend more to context, though do not reference a standard definition of the phenomenon.

The lack of a definition that is independent of time and space makes it difficult to compare findings across different settings and over time (Reynolds, 2007, p. 52) and creates challenges when referencing this phenomenon as a risk factor for various health outcomes. The inconsistency in definition and measurement present in the literature creates ambiguity. Residential instability is not adequately defined by numeric counts of moves nor is it necessarily related to homelessness. Given the above, it became clear that a definition of residential instability needed to be developed.

## DEVELOPING A DEFINITION OF RESIDENTIAL INSTABILITY USING WILSON’S CONCEPT ANALYSIS

Wilson (1963) offers a compelling technique for developing a definition of a concept. Wilson borrowed from real-world examples, drawing from situations which clearly reflected, contrasted with or closely aligned with the concept to develop a definition. These situations were labeled as model, contrary, borderline, and related cases. In this paper, illustrative examples from the principal author’s clinical experiences as an advanced practice nurse are used to develop a definition of residential instability. The model case contains each of the essential components. However, what makes it a model case is clarified by the contrary case, which does not at all illustrate the concept, and the borderline case, which contains some – but not all – of the essential components. The related case further contributes to the development of the definition by illustrating a concept that is importantly connected to it. By describing each of these four cases, the essential components in the model case are clarified and converge into a theoretical definition.

### MODEL CASE

Elijah is a 10 year old male living with his mother, maternal grandmother, and 13 year-old-sister. The family struggles financially with no savings and minimal income, but they have never experienced homelessness. They are behind on utility payments and have to apply food stamps with great care in order to secure food for the month. Elijah has moved 3 times in the past 2 years: the first move was due to deteriorating housing conditions in the rental unit the family had resided in since Elijah was born. The building was assigned for renovation and the family was given little notice to begin searching for an alternative residence. The only available apartment that was affordable with the family’s monthly income was outside of Elijah’s school district which resulted in a school transfer and required that he share a bedroom with his mom and sister. After 6 months, Elijah’s mom accepted a new job at higher pay working as a nursing assistant at a retirement home. Unfortunately, the facility was too far to walk and the family’s apartment was not located on the bus route which prompted a hasty exploration of alternative apartments. The family’s housing options were further restricted after learning that the security deposit would be not refunded as a consequence of early termination of the rental agreement. With few available options, the family selected a larger space in an attached row house close to mom’s new job in a neighborhood with a reputation for high crime. The landlord agreed to waive the initial security deposit,

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