



Longitudinal associations between residential mobility and early academic skills among low-income children



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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the direct and indirect relations between residential mobility during the year prior to kindergarten and academic skills (math, letter-word identification, and spelling) in the early elementary years for children from low-income families. Data were obtained from the Head Start Impact Study. The sample included 3627 children (50% male) who were eligible for Head Start. At baseline, children were on average a little over 4-years-old ($M = 49.12$ months, $SD = 6.79$). The sample was ethnically/racially diverse and had a range of maternal education levels. Residential mobility was conceptualized as either not moving (70% of the sample) or moving one or more times (30% of the sample) during prekindergarten. Data were collected at baseline (fall of 2002) and in the spring of prekindergarten, kindergarten and 1st grade. When controlling for a set of demographic, family, and child covariates, results from three separate path analyses indicated that mobility had consistently negative associations with children's academic skills but that these links were quite small, especially when looking beyond the prekindergarten year. Mobility during prekindergarten had small direct associations with all three skill areas (math, letter-word identification, spelling) at the end of prekindergarten, and significant but even smaller links with two of the three skills at the end of kindergarten and 1st grade. In addition, mobility had small indirect relations with all three skill areas in kindergarten and 1st grade, mediated through these same skills in prekindergarten and kindergarten. Implications of study findings for supporting low-income families and directions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Residential mobility, also called housing instability or frequent moves, is a relatively common experience for low-income families in the United States (U.S. Census, 2011). Indeed, children from low-income families move nearly twice as often as their more economically advantaged peers (Cohen & Wardrip, 2011). Extant research suggests that residential mobility is negatively related to a variety of child outcomes, including physical and oral health (Busacker & Kasehagen, 2012), self-regulation (Schmitt, Finders, & McClelland, 2015), and academic achievement (Herbers et al., 2012; Voight, Shinn, & Nation, 2012), although children from families of higher socioeconomic status may not be as susceptible to the negative effects of mobility (Ziol-Guest & McKenna, 2014). The majority

of this literature linking residential mobility with poor achievement outcomes has been conducted with school-age children and adolescents; few studies have examined the extent to which moving is related to preschool children's academic readiness and none have quantified the longitudinal associations between moving during the prekindergarten year and subsequent academic outcomes in early elementary school for children from low-income families.

Identifying the extent to which life experiences, such as moving prior to school entry, are linked with achievement problems in elementary school is important for developing efforts to support low-income families and enhance children's success. If residential mobility represents a key marker of early life disruptions (e.g., change in family structure or parent employment), it could serve as an indicator to help identify families that could benefit from programs aimed to promote resilience. Interventions and other supports for families may be most effective during the formative preschool year(s), when children are developing the critical foundational skills needed for school success in elementary school and beyond. The present study examines the direct and indi-

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rect relations between residential mobility during the year prior to kindergarten and academic readiness and achievement (math, letter-word identification, and spelling) in the early elementary years for children from low-income families.

1.1. Theoretical perspective

Several developmental models emphasize the importance of proximal contexts, including the home or family environment, for young children's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Lerner, 2006). For example, the bioecological framework posits that development in young children may be particularly sensitive to the effects of proximal processes (e.g., instability in the home context) because of their lack of knowledge and experience and heavy reliance on adults in their lives (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Krishnan, 2010). Furthermore, developmental systems theories argue that development does not occur as a result of the context itself, but rather, as a result of person-context interactions (Lerner, 2006). As such, a contextual factor like mobility may operate differently for preschool aged children than for older, adolescent children, due to young children's limited social-emotional and cognitive capacities. Yet residential mobility has been a relatively understudied developmental context for preschool children.

In addition, Heckman (2008) argues that all cognitive skills are formed on the foundation of cognitive skills developed previously. To use his words, "skills beget skills and capabilities foster future capabilities" (Heckman, 2008). Thus, if residential instability among low-income children is linked with academic difficulties during early childhood, such mobility could also serve as an early marker of a potential cascade effect in which poor academic readiness leads to poor academic functioning in subsequent years. In the current study, we examined whether mobility in prekindergarten was related to difficulties in concurrent academic skills, and whether such difficulties were then associated with poorer academic skills in the early elementary years.

1.2. Residential mobility and children from low-income families

Low-income families experience greater mobility than middle-income families as a result of more frequent changes in employment or job loss, changes in family composition, deteriorating housing or neighborhood quality, and foreclosure and/or eviction (Cohen & Wardrip, 2011). Residential mobility may also represent more of a vulnerability factor among children from low-income families because in this low-income context frequent moving is often coupled with other risk factors, such as low levels of maternal education and unemployment (Murphey, Bandy, & Moore, 2012). Furthermore, whereas middle-class families usually "move up" or into housing or neighborhoods of better quality, low-income families typically move in and out of similar homes and neighborhoods that often carry risks such as neighborhood violence, housing hazards, and crowding (Coulton, Theodos, & Turner, 2012).

As such, programs have been developed that focus on improving neighborhood quality for low-income families. One example that has been empirically evaluated is the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program. Parents who have been a part of this program and have moved from high-poverty neighborhoods to low-poverty neighborhoods report improvements in neighborhood conditions and demonstrate decreases in feelings of distress (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Similarly, in empirical evaluations of the Yonkers Project, adults who were randomly assigned to move from high-poverty to middle-class neighborhoods were more likely to work, reported less disorder and violence in their new communities and higher housing quality, and were less likely receive welfare (Fauth, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Fauth, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn,

2008). Although these programs are promising, they do not reach the large majority of low-income families, and results from analyses exploring the effects on children are mixed (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Leventhal, Fauth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2005).

1.3. Residential mobility and academic outcomes

Extant literature documents a negative relation between residential mobility and academic success in elementary and high school students (Obradovic et al., 2009; Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Voight et al., 2012). Even after controlling for characteristics such as free and reduced-price lunch eligibility, ethnicity, English language learner status, and special education eligibility, children and adolescents who move frequently perform worse on math and reading assessments (Cutuli et al., 2013; Herbers et al., 2012), are more likely to be retained (Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckerling, 1989), and demonstrate lower levels of adaptive functioning in classroom contexts (Masten et al., 1997) than those who experience residential stability. Recent research suggests the link between residential mobility and academic achievement persists even after controlling for socioeconomic status (e.g., income, maternal education; Cutuli et al., 2013). In one study, the achievement gaps associated with being low-income began to narrow by the end of eighth grade; however, children who experienced frequent mobility remained significantly behind academically (Cutuli et al., 2013).

Despite evidence for an association between residential mobility and achievement for school-age children and adolescents, little is known about whether moving during the preschool years is associated with children's academic readiness for kindergarten or their success in early elementary school. As compared to adolescence, the early childhood stage, and especially the prekindergarten year (approximately ages 4–5), has long been considered a sensitive period for healthy brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), making preschool children particularly vulnerable to environmental stress. Moreover, the prekindergarten year is when children are typically developing the critical foundations of early academic skills (e.g., in math and literacy) needed for long-term school success (La Paro & Pianta, 2000).

Just three recent studies have begun to investigate the link between residential mobility and young children's academic outcomes prior to school entry, but findings have been mixed. Ziol-Guest and McKenna (2014) conducted a study using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study and conceptualized mobility from birth to age five as three categories (never moved, moved 1–2 times, or moved three or more times). There was a distribution of income levels (poor, near poor, not poor) across all three mobility categories, with higher percentages of children living in or near poverty among the families that moved. In this study, results suggested that children, and particularly children from families considered to be poor, who moved more frequently (i.e., three or more moves) between birth and age five exhibited more attention problems and externalizing behaviors; however, moving was not related to children's language and literacy achievement at age five after controlling for several child (e.g., gender, age, whether the child was first born), maternal (e.g., race, citizenship, education), household (e.g., children living in the household, receipt of public housing), and economic characteristics (e.g., income, whether or not mother owned a car). Similarly, utilizing data from the Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, Anderson, Leventhal, and Dupéré (2014) found no link between moving (using a dichotomous variable that represented moved or didn't move) during the first 4 ½ years of life and preschool literacy or math achievement after controlling for child gender, ethnicity, Hispanic decent, child birth order, maternal age, study site, and a latent SES variable (consisting of income-to-needs ratio, maternal education, and maternal marital status); however, their sample was limited in demographic

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