# Beyond residential mobility: A broader conceptualization of instability and its impact on victimization risk among children ☆

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ABSTRACT

Predictability in a child's environment is a critical quality of safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments, which promote wellbeing and protect against maltreatment. Research has focused on residential mobility's effect on this predictability. This study augments such research by analyzing the impact of an instability index—including the lifetime destabilization factors (LDFs) of natural disasters, homelessness, child home removal, multiple moves, parental incarceration, unemployment, deployment, and multiple marriages–on childhood victimizations. The cross-sectional, nationally representative sample of 12,935 cases (mean age = 8.6 years) was pooled from 2008, 2011, and 2014 National Surveys of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV). Logistic regression models controlling for demographics, socio-economic status, and family structure tested the association between excessive residential mobility, alone, and with LDFs, and past year childhood victimizations (sexual victimization, witnessing community or family violence, maltreatment, physical assault, property crime, and polyvictimization). Nearly 40% of the sample reported at least one LDF. Excessive residential mobility was significantly predictive of increased odds of all but two victimizations; almost all associations were no longer significant after other destabilizing factors were included. The LDF index without residential mobility was significantly predictive of increased odds of all victimizations (AOR's ranged from 1.36 to 1.69), and the adjusted odds ratio indicated a 69% increased odds of polyvictimization for each additional LDF a child experienced. The LDF index thus provides a useful alternative to using residential moves as the sole indicator of instability. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive supports and services to support stability for children and families.

## 1. Introduction

Children rely on their expectations of the world around them to feel safe and secure, and to form the trusting relationships that become the foundations of their health and wellbeing across their life course. The Center on the Developing Child (2018) highlights

the importance of stable routines and environments for the development of strong executive function skills and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) *Essentials for Childhood* framework asserts that the degree of predictability in a child's social, emotional, and physical environment is a critical quality of safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments, which are imperative for preventing child maltreatment and assuring health and wellness (CDC, 2014). Although some transitions, such as the move from elementary to middle school, are expected and normative, pervasive and repetitive instability in multiple domains of life can greatly undermine predictability, which can introduce uncertainty, stress, and exposure to other risks for health problems like violence (Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, & Shattuck, 2013). As such, stability is an important construct to examine for its potential protective impact on future violence and victimization. Prior research has established that lack of residential stability is a risk factor for child maltreatment (Desmond, Gershenson, & Kiviat, 2015; Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Egolf, 2003), but existing research has been limited in its conceptualization of stability and in the number of outcomes explored. This paper presents nationally representative data using a new, expanded conceptualization of residential instability as a risk factor for a range of victimization outcomes.

### 1.1. Residential mobility as instability

When measured as residential mobility alone, residential instability has a well-established link to problem, aggressive, criminal, and violent behaviors, with more moves increasing the risk of each (Derzon, 2010). Instability, often measured as an excessive number of moves since birth (Gilman, Kawachi, Fitzmaurice, & Buka, 2003), can be a common feature in the lives of maltreated children due in part to out of home placements or changes in caretakers (Herrenkohl et al., 2003). As Desmond et al. (2015) note, this type of residential instability can also act as a catalyst for other forms of instability in families, which can in turn increase the risk of children experiencing violence and victimization.

Residential mobility is common in low-income families, as financial uncertainty is often accompanied by frequent residential relocations. For example, from 2005 to 2010, residents below the poverty line had a 52.5% moving rate, compared to people at or above 150% of poverty with a moving rate of only 31.6% (Ihrke & Faber, 2012). Young children often have little say in these relocations but experience associated consequences (both positive and negative). For instance, attendance at a new school can leave some children struggling with new academic content and changes in peer groups can leave some children feeling socially isolated and vulnerable (Adam, 2004). Homeless children are a particularly vulnerable population due to high levels of residential mobility. As Kirkman, Keys, Bodzak, and Turner (2010) elaborate, homelessness can leave children feeling a range of negative emotions, including confusion, anger, and sadness, and they may begin to see unsteadiness as the norm. Homeless children also exhibit mental health issues at high levels (Bassuk, Richard, & Tsertsvadze, 2015). In addition, interfamilial abuse, caregiver abuse, and peer rejection are all common environmental characteristics for homeless youth (Ferguson, 2009).

### 1.2. Other forms of instability

Stability within the family structure can also be interrupted by parental separation, divorce, and remarriage. Fomby and Cherlin (2007) found a positive association between family structure variability and behavioral problems in childhood and adolescence. Several scholars have hypothesized that remarriage, at least in the short-term, can be more detrimental to a child's wellbeing than a single-parent household due to the uncertainty and unpredictability associated with remarriage and blended families (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabellla, 1998). Furthermore, divorce and remarriage are often accompanied by residential moves and new economic situations, which could introduce additional stressors to children's lives. Of course, it is important to note that changes in stability are complex, and do not always confer risk. For example, Barile, Edwards, Dhingra, and Thompson (2015) found that divorce was protective of later health-related quality of life for adults who had childhood histories of high levels of family conflict in childhood.

Parental incarceration and deployment can also hinder childhood stability, as both involve separations, relocations, changes in routine, and other changes in family structure. The Department of Defense (DoD) reported a 50% increase in outpatient mental health visits for children of active-duty service members between 2003 and 2008 (Hefling, 2009). While the increase could be due to multiple factors, Hefling (2009) suggests that one reason for this increase is stress due to deployment, which can affect the non-deploying/at-home parent, and, consequently, also the children in the home. Parental deployment has also been associated with maladjustment for children and adolescents during the middle school years (Card et al., 2011), as well as sadness and concentration problems (Orthner & Rose, 2005), heightened levels of anxiety (Lester et al., 2010), increased risk of sensation-seeking behavior (Dahl, 2004), post-traumatic stress, increased blood pressure, and heart rate (Barnes, Davis, & Treiber, 2007). The at-home parent also faces new stressors, less support, and increased responsibilities, all of which can make him/her more likely to perpetrate child maltreatment. Indeed, rates of child maltreatment are higher during the deployment of a parent relative to nondeployment, often due to increases in rates of child neglect (Gibbs, Martin, Kupper, & Johnson, 2007; McCarthy et al., 2015; Rentz et al., 2007).

Perhaps one of the most overlooked consequences of mass incarceration is the millions of children living with the many repercussions of being separated from a parent (Travis & Waul, 2003). Over half of the U.S. prisoner population consists of parents with children under age 18 years (Glaze & Maruschak, 2011). Children of incarcerated parents must adjust to this major shift in family structure and are exposed to a host of uncertainties. Boys who grow up with an incarcerated parent are more likely to have internalizing problems, such as sleep disturbance, bedwetting, concentration problems, sadness, and withdrawal, and engage in antisocial behavior during adolescence and adulthood (Murray & Farrington, 2008). Murray, Farrington, Sekol, and Olsen (2009) reported a significant association between parental incarceration and children's mental health problems.