Residential mobility during adolescence: Do even "upward" moves predict dropout risk?

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to investigate the impact of housing instability in adolescence on the likelihood of subsequent graduation from high school. Combining census data, self-reports, and information about respondents' residential changes, we use the variation in households' number of moves and neighborhood quality to predict whether participants obtain a high school diploma. Controlling for major predictors of housing mobility, students experiencing at least one move over a 12-month period have a roughly 50% decreased likelihood of obtaining a high school diploma by the age of 25. These associations are identified regardless of whether students move to a poorer or less-poor neighborhood. Our results carry implications for the development of housing policies and interventions designed for disadvantaged populations.

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1. Introduction

The United States of the 21st century is a highly unequal society, in which the residential segregation of economic groups continues to grow (Reardon and Bischoff, 2011). Following from a history of racially exclusive policies and practices, combined with a host of policies promoting urban sprawl, this economic segregation is strongly tied to patterns of racial segregation (Dreier et al., 2014). At the broadest level, two strategies exist to address persistent racial and economic segregation; these strategies might be termed "preservation" and "mobility," respectively (Crowley and Pelletiere, 2012). The preservation approach emphasizes the stabilization and improvement of low-income neighborhoods (Hartman, 1984; Imbroscio, 2011; Pattillo, 2009). According to this perspective, affordable housing is in short supply and should be preserved where it exists. Those in favor of preservation argue that low-income households should not have to uproot themselves in order to access decent goods, services, and educational opportunities. Instead, housing and community development policy should focus on comprehensive investment in low-income communities, building on existing social capital and other community assets (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1996).

By comparison, the mobility approach, which has received greater attention within recent social science research, emphasizes the strategy of moving low-income households to non-poor areas. For instance, programs such as the Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program, the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment, and others have utilized specialized housing vouchers to help households move from public housing to neighborhoods that would be unaffordable to them otherwise (Popkin et al., 2003; de Souza Briggs et al., 2010). A significant research effort has been dedicated to the task of identifying

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the causal effects of these programs on low-income households. This body of research has found the impacts of such programs to vary widely based on the program, the analytic strategy, and the outcome under consideration (Ludwig et al., 2008; Rosenbaum and Zuberi, 2010).

One major obstacle to estimating neighborhood effects via a mobility program is that the potential benefits of moving to a non-poor neighborhood occur alongside the potential disruptiveness of a residential transition. Regarding the most prominent mobility program of recent years, MTO, Sampson (2008, p. 197–198) observes that:

> [A]lthough moving is a major life event associated with negative outcomes for youth (Hagan et al., 1996; Haynie and South, 2005), neighborhood change is coupled with moving by the MTO design. Hence, MTO cannot (experimentally) separate the impact of moving itself from differences in neighborhood context.

This methodological challenge remains unresolved within the existing literature (Burdick-Will et al., 2010). Moreover, while mobility interventions have focused on households moving from public housing, there is a relative dearth of research using broader population-based samples.

The present study provides a novel statistical approach to the intersection of mobility effects and neighborhood effects, estimating the relative predictiveness of mobility and neighborhood characteristics with regard to adolescents' likelihood of achieving high school graduation. High school graduation is a critical developmental milestone, predicting a range of social and economic outcomes that benefit both the individual and society (Tyler and Lofstrom, 2009). Based on prior literature, we hypothesize that the experience of moving is a risk factor for academic underachievement above and beyond observable predictors of moving. However, we seek to identify whether this risk differs between "downward," "parallel," and "upward" moves—in other words, moves to poorer, equally poor, or less-poor neighborhoods.

The paper begins with a review of the literature regarding the patterns and correlates of residential mobility in the United States. We then describe our analytic approach and results, which utilize the Add Health data set, a longitudinal, population-based survey that includes extensive information on neighborhood characteristics. In short, using a logistic regression approach, we find that the experience of moving during adolescence is associated with decreased odds of graduating from high school, even for adolescents moving to less-poor neighborhoods. We conclude with a discussion of these findings with respect to the "preservation versus mobility" debate.

2. Prior literature

2.1. Residential mobility and socioeconomic status

Overall, Americans' rates of residential mobility have declined over the past decades. During 1948, the first year of data collection in the annual Current Population Survey (CPS), 20.4% of Americans moved (U.S. Census Bureau, 1949). That figure dropped steadily, falling to 11.9% as of 2008 (Taylor et al., 2008), and then rising to 15.4% in more recent estimates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). While the nation as a whole has seen a general decline in mobility, significant numbers of children continue to be affected by residential transitions. Between 2008 and 2009, almost 11 million children experienced housing relocation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Low-income families with children continue to experience higher moving rates than the general population. The most recent American Community Survey (ACS) demonstrated a negative correlation between mobility rates and income among families with children: while less than 12% of households earning above 150% of the federal poverty level moved during 2011, households living below the poverty line moved at a rate of 26.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Moreover, according to the annual CPS surveys, residential mobility rates among high school dropouts and service workers actually increased after 1980, while those of blue- and white-collar workers continued to decline in parallel with the overall national trend (Fischer, 2002). Low-income households were more likely to move within their counties than to move between counties or states. This pattern may reflect a higher incidence of involuntary or less-voluntary relocations, as opposed to planned moves in pursuit of better economic opportunities (Fischer, 2002; DeLuca et al., 2009).

Housing instability among families has worsened with the financial crisis of the late 2000s and early 2010s. Increased foreclosure rates have led to larger numbers of families experiencing residential instability, including a rise in the number of households "doubling up," or residing with other households within a single housing unit (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, 2013; Leventhal and Newman, 2010). "Doubling up" increased among families in the nation's 324 largest metropolitan areas during the recession, with the timing and frequency of moves correlated directly with changes in local markets during this time period (Rogers and Winkler, 2013). Although rates of chronic homelessness among individuals decreased from 2008 to 2012, the U.S. Office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reported increases in family homelessness over the same time period (Cortes et al., 2012). Families with children appear to have been uniquely affected by the financial crisis, with housing instability presenting a major concern.

2.2. Residential mobility and educational outcomes

Prior literature has shown mobility to negatively predict subsequent educational outcomes such as high school graduation rates and college attendance, even when rigorous longitudinal research designs were used. For instance, in a six-year