

## Moving to Opportunity

This issue of *Poverty Research News* looks at current findings from the Moving to Opportunity program. The MTO encourages families living in public housing to move to lower poverty neighborhoods with the help of vouchers to pay for housing. The project ultimately tests the assumption that neighborhood has an effect on the health and well-being of its residents, and moving to higher-income neighborhoods will improve opportunities for families. The program is being evaluated in five cities: Boston, Baltimore, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. This issue looks at the most recent evidence from each of those cities.

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**A Synthesis of MTO Research on Self-Sufficiency, Safety and Health, and Behavior and Delinquency** page 3

*Alessandra Del Conte and Jeffrey Kling*

The authors look across several study sites and summarize findings on health, economic self-sufficiency, delinquency among youth, and other behavioral outcomes, with special attention to the Boston site, where they are key investigators. They find that, across the studies, moving to higher-income neighborhoods results in significant improvements in safety and child and parent physical and mental health.

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**Social Dimensions of Moving to Opportunity** page 7

*By Becky Pettit and Sara McLanahan*

This article discusses the value of studying the social connections and social capital of families participating in MTO, as well as initial findings across the different MTO research sites, and offers suggestions for future research on the social dimensions of the MTO program.

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**Moving to Better Neighborhoods Improves Health and Family Life among New York Families** page 11

*Tama Leventhal and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn*

Investigators at the New York site of the MTO find that self-sufficiency improved across the board, but especially among those families that moved to higher-income neighborhoods. Health and well-being also improved among the movers, and parenting practices changed as well. School involvement and juvenile delinquency were also examined.

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**The Effect of MTO on Baltimore Children's Educational Outcomes** page 13

*Jens Ludwig, Greg Duncan, and Helen Ladd*

The authors focus on the educational outcomes among Baltimore youth. They find that moving to low-poverty neighborhoods improves achievement among elementary school children, although the effects on teens are somewhat less clear. They base their findings on reading and math scores on standardized tests in the state, as well as drop-out rates, retention, suspensions, and absences. Contrary to expectations, the effects on educational outcomes appear to be just as large for both boys and girls.

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**The Social Context of New Neighborhoods among MTO Chicago Families** page 16

*Emily Rosenbaum*

Rosenbaum considers the changing social ties and dynamics when families move to lower-poverty neighborhoods in Chicago. She finds that social organization improves dramatically when families move out of public housing to higher income neighborhoods. Families feel considerably safer in their new neighborhoods and their concerns about violence and crime are much lower. In turn, psychological well-being improves.

## POVERTY RESEARCH NEWS

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# JOINT CENTER FOR POVERTY RESEARCH

## Research Development Grants RFP Food Assistance Research

The Northwestern University/University of Chicago Joint Center for Poverty Research announces its Research Development Grants program for social science scholars interested in food assistance research.

Grants will be awarded in amounts up to \$40,000 for the 2001-2002 program. Start-up projects and projects by young and less experienced scholars will be offered grants of up to \$20,000. Awards will be made to scholars who propose research including, but not limited to:

### **Food Assistance Research**

- interactions between food assistance programs and other welfare programs with respect to participation, administration, budget exposure, and the role of food assistance as a personal and fiscal stabilizer
- the effects of the macroeconomic environment on the need for food assistance, level of participation, and food assistance program costs
- the well-being of current and former food assistance recipients.

Other topics related to welfare reform and macroeconomic interactions with food assistance will be considered.

This program is designed to encourage:

- experienced researchers in other areas to start projects in the area of food assistance
- research on food assistance using innovative approaches and research methods
- smaller, start-up projects with the potential to make a significant contribution to food assistance research
- younger and junior scholars to develop research agendas in the area of food assistance

**Applications are due May 1, 2001.** Absolutely no applications will be accepted after May 1. See the JCPR web site at [www.jcpr.org](http://www.jcpr.org) for terms of the grant and application instructions. For more information, contact the Joint Center for Poverty Research at 847-491-4145 or [povcen@northwestern.edu](mailto:povcen@northwestern.edu).

The awards will cover a period of performance beginning August 1, 2001, through November 30, 2002. Grant recipients must present their preliminary work at a workshop to be held in the spring of 2002 and are required to present their research at a conference in Washington, DC, in October 2002.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service provides funding for this program.

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# A Synthesis of MTO Research on Self-Sufficiency, Safety and Health, and Behavior and Delinquency

Alessandra Del Conte and Jeffrey Kling<sup>1</sup>

**G**iven the evidence of a strong association between residential neighborhoods and the well-being of its residents, the recent and striking increase in concentrated poverty in American inner cities has potentially disconcerting implications. Residential location may greatly shape access to opportunities because of factors associated with either neighborhood wealth (quality of schools, access to labor markets, safety, and more efficient social institutions) or with social capital and peer effects. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Moving to Opportunity (MTO) demonstration project provides a unique opportunity to measure the causal effects of neighborhood characteristics on outcomes for low-income families. The project helps families move from high-poverty neighborhoods to low-poverty neighborhoods through a random lottery (see sidebar on page 6 for a description of the MTO project)

Below we offer an overview of some of the early findings on economic self-sufficiency, youth delinquency and behavior problems, safety, and adult and child health. MTO is underway in five cities: Baltimore, Los Angeles, Boston, New York, and Chicago. Although there is no clear, significant impact of moving from a high- to a low-poverty neighborhood on economic self-sufficiency, there are significant and positive effects on child and parent health, as well as on child behavior and youth delinquency and on safety and exposure to violence.

## Economic Self-Sufficiency

Measuring the impact of residential neighborhoods on economic self-sufficiency, or more specifically, on welfare receipt and employment of low-income families, was among the main concerns of the MTO demonstration program. With the number of people living in poverty in the United States nearly doubling from 1970 to 1990, from 4.1 to 8 million people (Jargowsky, 1997), and with the continued decline of the inner city, MTO brought with it the hope that moving low-income families from high-poverty to low-poverty neighborhoods might increase employment accessibility and lessen dependence on welfare. Moving to a lower-poverty neighborhood can mean not only being closer to suburban job market opportunities, but also gaining exposure to

greater social capital, including access to middle-class role models and community norms that might be less supportive of welfare and more supportive of work. A move, however, may also be counterproductive, at least initially, given that it can greatly disrupt the informal mechanisms and social networks through which people obtain job referrals and access to informal child care—at least until social networks in the new neighborhood are established (Kain, 1968). Research on the experience of Chicago families in the Gautreaux housing mobility program suggests that moves to suburban locations may increase employment rates (Rosenbaum, 1995). To date, however, there is no conclusive evidence on the effect of neighborhood characteristics on economic self-sufficiency among low-income families. Although MTO has the potential to answer this question, short-run economic outcomes for welfare, employment, and income have not been consistent across sites, where research was headed by different researchers using different methods.

## Welfare Receipt

Research from MTO-Baltimore shows that providing families the chance to relocate to very low-poverty neighborhoods (the experimental group) reduces the rate of welfare use by a little more than 6 percentage points, on average, or about 15% of the control group's welfare receipt rate. Further, this difference increases over time. Providing families with Section 8 vouchers but without a constraint on where they can relocate (the Section 8 group) seems to have little impact on welfare use after the first six quarters following random assignment.

In the MTO-Boston site, there was a sharp drop over time in welfare receipt, from 73% in 1994 (before random assignment) to 40% in 1998. However, there was no statistically significant difference in the control, Section 8, and experimental groups two years after random assignment.

In New York, the overall level of welfare participation did not differ significantly across the three groups at a three-year follow-up study. However, there were differences in welfare participation when families originally enrolled in MTO, and when assessing the change in welfare participation, there was a substantially larger reduction for the Section 8 comparison group.

## Employment and Income

MTO-Boston research shows that employment increased dramatically over time, from 19% in 1994 to 49% in 1998. Again, there were no meaningful differences across groups

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two years after random assignment, a result that is also consistent with outcomes in Baltimore, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Only the preliminary data from the MTO-New York site found that experimental and Section 8 mothers who were unemployed at baseline were about 10% more likely than mothers in the control group to have found a job at the time of the follow-up study.

Although MTO-Los Angeles finds no significant employment effects, it does provide some modest evidence of an increase in weekly earnings and hours worked for mover families, as opposed to controls. There was no clear evidence of a meaningful difference in earnings across the three MTO groups in the Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, or New York sites. Preliminary MTO-New York data, however, suggest that the experimental group has significantly higher per person household incomes than the control group.

### ***Welfare-to-Work Transitions***

The large changes in economic self-sufficiency over time yet the small and often insignificant differences among MTO groups suggest that broader forces, such as welfare reform and the tightness of local labor markets, might have been more important determinants of short-term economic outcomes than residential location. Even at sites where outcomes might suggest that neighborhoods affect some aspects of self-sufficiency in the short run (such as in Baltimore and New York), further research is needed to examine which neighborhood factors mediate such change. Results from Baltimore, for instance, suggest that most of the 15% difference in the rate of welfare use between the experimental and control groups might be explained by the higher rate at which people in the former are able to move from welfare into work. The specific channels through which lower-poverty neighborhoods have a positive and differential impact on welfare-to-work transitions, however, are not yet well understood. Change here could have easily been mediated by improved social capital, by proximity to labor markets, or simply by improved access to transportation or more effective government institutions.

### **Safety and Health**

By providing more desirable housing conditions (better heating and air quality and less crowding, fewer dust mites, cockroaches, mice, and rats), greater safety, and less exposure to violence, relocating from a high- to a low-poverty neighborhood has the potential to improve the mental and physical health of children and parents—a result that is confirmed in MTO research studies. Medical research suggests that exposure to violence may indeed be a channel through which neighborhoods affect child and adult health and behavior. Exposure to violence affects levels of stress (and potentially parenting behaviors and prevalence of asthma) as well as patterns of child behavior, such as difficulty concen-

trating because of fatigue resulting from sleep disturbances, fear of being alone, or an increased aggressiveness (Groves et al., 1993). Living in the inner city is also associated with other detrimental health outcomes, such as high rates of accidents and injuries among children (Quinlan, 1996).

### ***Safety***

Safety was one of the main reasons why Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York families wanted to move away from their high-poverty neighborhoods. Strong evidence of increased safety, reduced victimization, and exposure to violence across all the MTO sites can thus be considered one of the main successes of the MTO program. Prior to moving, 48% of all Boston household heads reported feeling unsafe or very unsafe. At the follow-up study, this level fell to 39% in the control group and to 24% among the experimental group. Postprogram victimization in Boston also fell dramatically for both the experimental and the Section 8 groups, reaching 12% of households at the follow-up study compared with 26% among the control group. Although there was a 50% reduction in exposure to violence in the New York MTO—consistent with outcomes in Boston—the difference across the three different groups was not statistically significant.

### ***Parent Health***

Responses of Boston household heads to self-reported health questions constitute some of the most striking results of the MTO program. In terms of overall health, 58% of the control group indicated that their general health was “good or better,” while 69% of the experimental group and 76% of the Section 8 group reported better or good health. The significant rise in reports of peacefulness and calmness among experimental and Section 8 parents, compared with the control group, indicates that a change in mental health and positive affect was at least, in part, responsible for the large and positive impact on general physical health.

Similar results were found in the New York MTO study, where an improvement in the overall health of experimental parents, compared with controls, was closely linked to a dramatic improvement in their emotional well-being, as evident by a sharp decline in parental depressive and anxious behavior. This finding did not hold for the New York Section 8 group.

### ***Child Health***

Boston MTO data confirmed what fieldwork had suggested: the move to lower-poverty neighborhoods—which might provide safer places in which children can play, less exposure to acute levels of stress, and improved housing conditions—is associated with a decrease in non-sport-related injuries among children, as well as a decline in the prevalence of asthma attacks. The prevalence of injuries among

the Boston experimental group, which include falls, fights, and dangerous external factors, such as needles or glass, declined 74% relative to the control group. Fewer environmental irritants and lower levels of stress are likely reasons for the lowered probability of an asthma attack; attacks requiring medical attention fell by 65% among the experimental group compared with the control. New York data also show improved health among children in the experimental group, and mental health was also improved by moving.

### Delinquency and Behavior Problems

There are many ways that neighborhood characteristics can influence youths' decision to engage in crime and delinquency. Community resources, adult influence, as well as peers may

affect choices (Jencks and Mayer, 1990). Behavior may be guided by the *contagion effect*, whereby the benefit of engaging in a certain activity increases with the proportion of one's peers who also engage in that activity. Among the factors that give rise to this effect are the stigma and the physical externality effect, by which the negative image of engaging in delinquent behavior diminishes as more people engage in it, and by which an increase in delinquency rates reduces one's chances of getting caught and arrested. Behavior may also be shaped by adults, who can influence youth by becoming role models, law enforcers, and guarantors of public order (Wilson, 1987; Borjas, 1995). In addition, enriched community resources and access to the recreational activities, improved schools, and better labor market opportunities often associated with more affluent neighborhoods may significantly reduce the actual and perceived returns on delinquent behavior and enhance the perceived benefits of education.

These factors suggest that a move from high-poverty to low-poverty neighborhoods, by strengthening human capital, may in fact diminish youth problem behavior—a result that is, for the most part, confirmed by the Boston, New York, and Baltimore data. However, the mechanisms through which this reduction takes place require further research.

### Behavior Problems

According to data from MTO-Boston, the prevalence of behavior problems among boys (ages 8–14) in the experimental group was 9 percentage points (or 27%) lower than the average for the control group. This result is based on an index of seven external behavior problems (child has trouble getting along with teachers, is disobedient at home, is disobedient at school, hangs out with troublemakers, bullies others, is unable to sit still, and is depressed). The Boston results also indicate a decline in behavior problems among girls, but the decline was statistically insignificant. The gender gap may be due to the fact that girls in families that moved reduced their social contact with other children in their new neighborhoods by 30%.

Preliminary results from MTO-New York also find some evidence of fewer problem behaviors among children ages 8–18. Namely, fewer children reported feeling unhappy, sad, or depressed and fewer reported arguing a lot. There were no significant differences between the MTO groups for other behaviors, such as drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes, although the reported prevalence of these behaviors was low, so even sizable effects are unlikely to be statistically significant given the available sample sizes.

### Arrests

The prevalence and incidence of arrests for violent crimes for experimental group teenagers at the time of the follow-up study in Baltimore were significantly lower than in the

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### BOSTON:

Katz, Lawrence F., Jeffrey R. Kling, and Jeffrey B. Liebman. (Forthcoming 2001). Moving to Opportunity in Boston: Early results of a randomized mobility experiment. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*.

### CHICAGO:

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Rosenbaum, Emily, and Laura E. Harris. (June 1, 2000). Residential mobility and opportunities: Early impacts of the Moving to Opportunity demonstration program in Chicago. available at: [www.wws.princeton.edu/~kling/mto/chicago.htm](http://www.wws.princeton.edu/~kling/mto/chicago.htm)

### LOS ANGELES:

Hanratty, Maria H., Sara A. McLanahan, and Becky Pettit. (April 1998). The impact of the Los Angeles Moving to Opportunity program on residential mobility, neighborhood characteristics, and early child and parent outcomes. Working paper no. 98-18. Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University. available at [www.wws.princeton.edu/~kling/mto/la.htm](http://www.wws.princeton.edu/~kling/mto/la.htm)

Pettit, Becky, Sara A. McLanahan, and Maria Hanratty. (February 2000). Moving to Opportunity: Benefits and hidden costs. Working paper no. 98-11. Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University. available at [www.wws.princeton.edu/~kling/mto/la.htm](http://www.wws.princeton.edu/~kling/mto/la.htm)

### NEW YORK:

Leventhal, Tama, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. (March 1, 2000). Moving to Opportunity: What about the kids? available at [www.wws.princeton.edu/~kling/mto/ny.htm](http://www.wws.princeton.edu/~kling/mto/ny.htm)

Please note: Each of these articles can also be accessed through: [www.mtoresearch.org](http://www.mtoresearch.org)

## MTO PROGRAM DESIGN

The MTO program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), was implemented in five large cities with populations of at least 400,000 in metropolitan areas of at least 1.5 million people.

Participant eligibility was limited to very low-income families with children who lived in public housing or Section 8 project-based housing located in central city neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty.

Eligible participants in the MTO demonstration were randomly assigned to three groups:

- the experimental group receives Section 8 rental certificates or vouchers to be used only in low-poverty areas (census tracts with less than 10% of the population below the poverty line in 1989); in addition, they receive counseling and assistance in finding a private unit to lease;
- the Section 8 comparison group receives regular Section 8 rental certificates or vouchers (geographically unrestricted) and the typical briefings and assistance from the public housing authority; and
- the control group continues to receive their current project-based assistance.

The demonstration is designed to answer two important questions about the role and effectiveness of assisted housing mobility:

- What are the impacts of mobility counseling on families' location choices and on their housing and neighborhood conditions?
- What are the impacts of neighborhood conditions on the employment, income, education, and social well-being of MTO families?

The participants in the MTO program volunteered to participate. Thus, the results of the MTO study cannot be generalized to the larger population; the qualities that led them to volunteer may also affect their outcomes. However, because of the random assignment of the volunteers into one of the three groups, the characteristics of the members of each group will, on average, be the same. Hence, the MTO program makes it possible to isolate the effects on various outcomes of MTO versus standard Section 8 vouchers and public housing. Outcomes for all three groups will be systematically monitored and evaluated over a 10-year period.

Reprinted from: Office of Policy Development and Research, "Expanding Housing Choices for HUD-Assisted Families: First Biennial Report to Congress—Moving to Opportunity Fair Housing Demonstration."

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, April 1996.

Available online <http://www.wws.princeton.edu/~kling/mto/background.htm>

control group, and the incidence of arrests in the Section 8 group was also marginally lower (and statistically significant). The drop in violent crime arrests was accompanied by an increase in property crime arrests in the experimental group, although the property crime effect appears to be short-term and does not persist beyond three years after random assignment. Because these results were obtained from state juvenile arrest data, and because lower-poverty neighborhoods are likely to have greater law enforcement and victims are more likely to report less serious crimes, the results are likely to overestimate increases in youth involvement in crime and to underestimate any reduction in crime in the experimental group. Preliminary findings from Boston and Baltimore suggest that families are more likely to move via the MTO program if they know their children are at risk for criminal involvement. This self-selection may also attenuate the delinquency reduction results.

### Conclusion

Although preliminary MTO results are inconclusive on the impact on economic self-sufficiency of moving to lower-poverty neighborhoods, the data consistently suggest that such a transition is associated with significant improvements in safety, child and parent physical and mental health, as well as youth delinquency and behavior problem. The short-term impacts of MTO presented above are important in their own right, and also provide intriguing hypotheses for future research on long-term effects and on the mechanism through which the impacts of neighborhoods may occur. ■

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# Social Dimensions of Moving to Opportunity

By Becky Pettit and Sara McLanahan<sup>1</sup>

## The Importance of Social Capital

**A**lthough the primary goal of the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program is to increase the economic self-sufficiency of some of America's poorest families, there are compelling reasons to ask how the program affects social capital. Social capital, defined as "relationships of commitment and trust" (Coleman, 1988), exists at both the community and individual levels. At the community level, social capital refers to the ties among members of the community. Such ties are thought to affect the quality of local institutions (e.g., schools) as well as local conditions (e.g., public safety). At the individual level, social capital refers to the connection between a particular individual and the community—including both institutions and individuals. Here, social integration and participation in community activities and relationships with other individuals is believed to affect access to information and community resources more generally.

Although most analysts agree that moving to a nonpoor neighborhood is likely to increase access to social capital at the aggregate level (better schools, less crime), there is less agreement about the effects of moving on social capital at the individual level. At issue here is whether moving breaks ties to friends and neighbors and whether poor people are able to rebuild those ties in their new neighborhoods. Research has demonstrated that, even in America's poorest communities, people have invaluable ties to neighbors and friends that help them survive in times of need (Stack, 1974; Edin and Lein, 1997). The disruption of such ties, which occurs when people move, leads to a loss of social capital. Previous studies have found a link between residential mobility during childhood and decreased educational achievement, hypothesizing that these negative effects can, in part, be attributed to a loss in social capital (Astone and McLanahan, 1994; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994).

Data gathered from MTO families can help us understand how social capital is accumulated and exchanged in different types of neighborhoods and how it influences the lives of poor families. In addition, information on the social connections of MTO families can help us better understand how social context influences the consequences of residential mobility for children.

## Description of Studies

Researchers in Boston, Los Angeles, and New York report information on both the neighborhood conditions of program participants at the census tract level and the social interactions and participation of all subjects (See Table 1 for a brief

description of measures).<sup>2</sup> At the aggregate level, all three sites gathered information on poverty rates. Researchers in Boston also collected information on welfare receipt, female headship, managerial and professional occupational status, educational attainment, English language proficiency, and race and ethnicity. Researchers in Los Angeles assembled data on murder rates, educational attainment, employment, and female headship. Finally, researchers in New York collected data on income, employment, race and ethnicity, and home-ownership rates.

Individual-level data were also collected in all three sites. Indicators of social capital fall in two general domains: indicators of direct social interaction with other individuals, and indicators of participation and involvement in organizations and institutions. In Boston, respondents were asked whether they had visited with a friend or relative in their own home or their friend's home during the month prior to the survey. They also were asked if their children had at least one close friend in the neighborhood (Katz, Kling, and Liebman, see references, page 5).<sup>3</sup> In New York, respondents were asked if they had attended a school function or class event and whether they had volunteered or served on a school committee in the year prior to the survey. The New York study also asked about children's involvement in school activities (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). In Los Angeles, parents were asked about their interaction with other parents, involvement in school activities, and church attendance. Researchers in Los Angeles also collected measures of children's supervision and participation in activities (Pettit, McLanahan, and Hanratty, 2000).

## Results across MTO Studies

There is clear evidence across all three sites that the MTO program increased neighborhood quality (see also Rosenbaum in this issue for results in Chicago). Compared with the control group, participants in the MTO experimen-

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2. A number of papers based on data from the Chicago site discuss differences in both the neighborhood characteristics and individual social ties of MTO experimental and Section 8 groups (e.g. Rosenbaum and Harris 2000). None of these papers, however, compares experimental and control groups.

3. Unless otherwise noted, full citations to all references to MTO research are found on page 5 of this issue.

**Table 1. Measures of Social Capital in MTO Programs at Follow-up.**

City	Boston	Los Angeles	New York
<b>Measures</b>			
<i>Aggregate</i>	Poverty rate, welfare receipt, female-headed households, managerial and professional workers, education beyond high school, speaks almost no English, Hispanic, black	Murder rate, poverty, employment, college graduates, female-headed households	Median income poverty, low income, high income, unemployment, black, Latino, rental households
<i>Individual Parents</i>	Adult Social Interaction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visited with friend or relative at own home at least once a week in the past month</li> <li>• Visited with friend or relative at their home at least once a week in the past month</li> </ul>	Parental Connections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents talk with parents of children’s friends</li> <li>• Attend school programs</li> <li>• Go to church</li> </ul>	Parental School Engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend school function</li> <li>• Attend school/class event</li> <li>• Volunteered at school or on school committee</li> </ul>
<i>Children</i>	Children’s social interaction (ages 6-15) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least one close friend in the neighborhood</li> </ul>	Children’s Participation (ages 6-17) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supervised outside the home</li> <li>• Participation in any activities</li> <li>• Total number of activities</li> </ul>	School Activity Participation (ages 8-18) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orchestra, band, theater, drama, dance, or choir</li> <li>• Organized sports teams</li> <li>• Student government or council</li> <li>• Academic clubs</li> </ul>
<b>Findings</b>			
<i>Aggregate</i>	Significant differences in all measures between MTO experimental and control. Significant differences in all but last 3 for Section 8 and control. No between-group (MTO-Section 8) comparisons.	Significant differences in all measures except murder for MTO experimental and control and for Section 8 and control. Significant difference between MTO experimental and Section 8 in poverty and college degree.	Significant differences in all measures except black household for MTO experimental and control. No significant differences reported for Section 8 or between MTO and Section 8 groups.
<i>Individual Parents</i>		Section 8 adults are less likely to attend church than control.	MTO adults are less likely to volunteer than control.  Section 8 adults are more likely than control to attend school/class event.
<i>Children</i>	Girls in MTO and Section 8 group are less likely to have a friend in the neighborhood than control.		Section 8 children are less likely to participate in student government or council than control.

tal and Section 8 groups were living in neighborhoods with lower rates of poverty, welfare receipt, and female headship, higher rates of employment and education, and higher percentages of managerial and professional workers.

Although only one site (Los Angeles) explicitly tested for significant differences between MTO experimental and Section 8 groups, the evidence suggests that the experimental group fared better than the Section 8 group on several indicators of neighborhood quality. In Boston, those in the experimental group were more likely to live in neighborhoods with lower minority concentrations and higher proportions of English speakers than controls, whereas there were no differences between the Section 8 group and controls on these variables. (Katz, Kling, and Liebman, forthcoming). In Los Angeles, those in the experimental group live in neighborhoods with lower poverty rates and higher percentages of college graduates than members of the Section 8 group (Pettit, McLanahan, and Hanratty, 2000).<sup>4</sup>

Many people argue that these aggregate measures are important indicators of social capital or represent the potential to construct social capital. For example, in safe communities, people do not have to worry about interacting with neighbors, leaving children in afterschool programs, and going to school programs at night. Moreover, living in a community with extant links to other realms of society may mean that forming community social relations may be more important for successful child development because the social relations provide links to employment, opportunities, and successful role models. To the extent that quality of neighborhoods is a crude measure of social capital, MTO program participants assigned to the experimental and Section 8 comparison groups have a distinct advantage over members of the control group. Moreover, it appears that members of the experimental group fare even better than those in the Section 8 comparison group.

At the individual level, social capital confers few positive effects. The vast majority of differences in individual-level indicators between the experimental and control groups are statistically equivalent to zero. However, where significant differences across the groups exist, those in the experimental group fare worse than those in the control group. Research finds no statistically significant differences between MTO experimental and control respondents with respect to the social connections of parents, for example. The only statistically significant difference between the groups is with respect to the social connections of children in Boston. Research in Boston shows that girls in the MTO experimental group are less likely to have a friend in a neighborhood compared with girls in the control group (Katz, Kling, and Liebman, forthcoming).

The effects in the Section 8 group are somewhat mixed. Again, most of the differences in individual-level social connections between the Section 8 group and the control

group are not statistically different from zero. However, among adults, there are both negative and positive effects associated with being in the Section 8 group. Research in Los Angeles finds that Section 8 respondents are less likely to attend church than control respondents (Pettit, McLanahan, and Hanratty, 2000). In contrast, research in New York finds that adults in the Section 8 comparison group are more likely to attend a school or class event than are adults in the control group (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

Among children, however, the effects of being in the Section 8 comparison group are either negative or statistically no different from zero. Among children in the New York study, those in the Section 8 group are less likely to participate in student government or council than those in the control group (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). In addition, research in Boston indicates that girls in the Section 8 group are less likely to have a friend in a neighborhood compared with girls in the control group (Katz, Kling, and Liebman, forthcoming).<sup>5</sup>

### Implications for Future Research

Research on the MTO program finds clear benefits in neighborhood quality for both MTO experimental and Section 8 group members. Furthermore, the evidence described above suggests that participation in the MTO program does not lead to social isolation. These findings are particularly reassuring in that the data were collected within one to three years after the program began. Given that it takes time to develop new ties, we would expect the short-term effects of the program on social capital to be more negative than the long-term effects.

Despite the good news contained in these findings, continuing to collect information on the social connections of MTO families makes sense for a number of reasons. First, information about the social connections of MTO families is

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4. We might expect even greater differences in indicators of neighborhood quality given program requirements that stipulate moves to low-poverty neighborhoods among the MTO experimental group. However, actual mobility rates among the MTO experimental group are lower than those of the Section 8 group and, consequently, group averages take into account the neighborhood conditions of participants who both move to low-poverty neighborhoods and those who stay in high-poverty ones.

5. In research on Chicago that focuses only on the post-move social connections for movers, Rosenbaum and Harris (2000) find that Section 8 movers in Chicago are more likely than MTO movers to have neighborhood-based social ties. Section 8 respondents are more likely than MTO respondents to report people in their neighborhood from whom they would seek advice, who would lend them money, and who would help them. An important caveat to this finding is highlighted in the Los Angeles research, which takes account of unmeasured differences between movers and nonmovers in the different experimental groups. Pettit, McLanahan, and Hanratty (2000) note that although research assessing the direct effects of moving shows some negative effects on social connectivity, when they control for the factors that influence who moves, there is little evidence that moving has negative effects on the social connections they measure. The only persistent finding in models that take account of factors that influence who moves is that young children (6–11) moving to middle-class neighborhoods participate in fewer afterschool activities than comparable children moving to other neighborhoods and nonmovers. These results suggest that there may be negative selection into moving for the MTO experimental group.

essential for adequately testing alternative theories about how and why neighborhoods influence life chances. To make best use of information on the social connections of MTO families, it would be useful to gather more detail about program participants' ties with their neighbors, involvement in neighborhood institutions, and attributes of those individuals and institutions. Further, it would be instructive to identify how the ties of MTO families compare with those of their current neighbors.

Second, comparing families assigned to the MTO experimental group and those assigned to the Section 8 group has the potential to illuminate how neighborhood quality influences the formation of social connections. On the one hand, building ties may be more difficult for MTO experimental families because of the affluence of their new neighbors. On the other hand, building ties may be easier for experimental families because of increases in safety or a strong presence of existing social institutions. Finally, longitudinal information on the nature and extent of social ties of program participants will enable us to examine whether relationships formed early in the program represent a form of capital that might help families achieve economic self-sufficiency. ■

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## MTO Legislative History

The Moving to Opportunity (MTO) demonstration was authorized by Section 152 of the 1992 Housing and Community Development Act. The act provided funding for tenant-based rental assistance and supportive counseling services to test and evaluate the effectiveness of metropolitan area-wide efforts to increase housing mobility. Efforts seek to "assist very low-income families with children who reside in public housing or housing receiving project-based assistance under Section 8 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1937 to move out of areas with high concentrations of persons in poverty to areas with low concentrations of such persons."

When MTO was authorized, Congress appropriated approximately \$70 million for approximately 1,300 Section 8 rental assistance payments for the demonstration and a modest amount of funding for housing counseling. Although Congress rescinded a second year of funding for MTO in 1995, Section 8 rental assistance resources and counseling resources increased because the Los Angeles and Boston housing authorities volunteered to add additional Section 8 certificates and vouchers from their own Section 8 programs to the demonstration.

Five sites were selected by HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros in March of 1994—Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. The MTO was implemented between 1994 and 1999 by local Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) and Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs).

Reprinted from: Office of Policy Development and Research, "Expanding Housing Choices for HUD-Assisted Families: First Biennial Report to Congress—Moving to Opportunity Fair Housing Demonstration."

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, April 1996. Available online  
<http://www.wws.princeton.edu/~kling/mto/background.htm>

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# Moving to Better Neighborhoods Improves Health and Family Life among New York Families

Based on research by Tama Leventhal and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn<sup>1</sup>

**R**esearchers evaluating the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) project in New York have studied changes in family economic and social circumstances among those leaving public housing for better neighborhoods. Given the established link between health and socioeconomic status, and by extension neighborhood, the prospects for improved health and family functioning should be optimistic for those families moving to a better neighborhood. Researchers indeed have found positive outcomes among families that moved from public housing.

Specifically, they found that employment rose, welfare receipt fell, mental health improved, parenting became less harsh, and children's lives became more structured. Parents were more involved in their children's education, unless they moved to affluent neighborhoods, in which case, their involvement dropped. The positive effects on children included improved health and slightly more participation in school activities (clubs, etc). There is no evidence, however, that moving to better neighborhoods altered delinquent behavior.

## Study Description

The researchers measured changes in family life by comparing three sets of families: those given vouchers and support, with a requirement to move to a lower-poverty neighborhood (experimental families); those given vouchers with no restrictions on their choice of neighborhood (Section 8 group); and a control group that received no financial or other support (see sidebar, page 6, for a description of the MTO project).

The researchers were especially interested in changes in maternal employment and welfare use, physical and mental health, and parenting behavior (warmth and harshness, rules and routines, and involvement in children's school). They also examined children's physical and mental health, their participation in school activities and their future hopes and expectations, as well as teen delinquency.

The researchers measured changes three years after the families had relocated. There were 293 families that participated in this initial study. Of those 293, only about 30% chose to take part in the randomly assigned "treatment" they were offered (that is, given financial assistance and support to move to lower-poverty neighborhoods or given financial assistance to move anywhere). These low take-up rates make firm conclusions difficult.

The families that chose to participate were more likely to be headed by younger, unemployed mothers with lower

household incomes (average household income for all families was just over \$10,000). There were also marginally more adults in the household, and the children were more likely to have physical, emotional, or mental health problems than children in families that did not choose to participate. Thus, the families that chose to participate were somewhat more disadvantaged than those choosing not to participate.

Where the families moved varied by the type of support they received. Those in the experimental group, as was mandated, moved to less disadvantaged neighborhoods. Although the Section 8 group tended to move to neighborhoods that were, by Census Bureau descriptions, little improved, the families' perceptions were that the neighborhoods were superior.

Interviews with families were conducted with primary caregivers and two randomly selected children in each household. The interviews were drawn largely from national surveys, the Abt Baseline Survey, other MTO site evaluations, and several neighborhood-based studies. At the time of the follow-up (after 3 years), almost all families continued to reside in New York City.

## Effects on Family Income

When the researchers interviewed the families three years after the experiment began, employment had increased for all three groups (nearly half were employed after 3 years, up from one-fourth at the beginning of the experiment). The increases were steeper, however, for mothers who moved (experimental and Section 8 groups) than for those in the control group. Approximately 10% more mothers in both the experimental and Section 8 groups had entered the workforce compared with controls.

Welfare receipt showed similar patterns. All three groups experienced a decline in welfare use, but the drop was significantly larger for the two groups that moved out of public housing, and particularly so for the Section 8 group. Consistent with the rise in employment and decline in

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welfare receipt, family income improved across all three groups, and there were no statistically significant differences across the groups. Per person income, on the other hand, improved significantly for the experimental group.

Further exploration of the earnings differences across the groups shows that those in the experimental group had higher weekly earnings than those in the control group (although differences were not significant). Mothers in both the experimental and Section 8 groups also worked more hours per week than did women in the control group, but only the Section 8 women's work weeks were significantly longer.

### **Effects on Health**

Changes in overall health between the three groups, in contrast, were striking. Among the experimental group, mothers were 15% less likely to report depression symptoms than mothers in the control group. The results for mothers in the Section 8 group were not significantly different from control mothers. Experimental mothers were also 15% less likely to report signs of anxiety than were control mothers. Section 8 mothers also felt less anxious but to a lesser extent than mothers in the experimental group.

Among the children, the effects on health were similar. (Children were, on average, 12 years old, and half were boys.) Overall, children who moved were in better physical health but the differences were only statistically significant for children in the experimental group. Mental health was also improved by moving. Among children in the experimental group, 30% reported feeling unhappy, sad, or depressed in the prior six months, 35% of Section 8 children reported those feelings, while 53% of the control children reported feeling unhappy, sad, or depressed. Experimental children also reported arguing less frequently than control children, and Section 8 children were less likely to have disobeyed their parents in the prior six months.

### **Effects on Parenting**

Parenting styles also changed. Mothers in the experimental and Section 8 groups were less harsh in their parenting than control group mothers. Their levels of warmth, however, remained unchanged. (Warmth includes letting the child know he or she is loved, acting loving and affectionate, and helping the child with something important.) Among experimental families, there were fewer rules enforced governing behavior when with peers than in control families. However, experimental families were more likely than control families to assign evening curfews and chores on a regular basis, indicating more structure in their lives.

### **School Involvement**

Finally, school involvement among parents changed as well, although not always toward more involvement. Parent involvement, in fact, was highest among Section 8 families—

those moving to similarly low-income neighborhoods. They were more likely to attend a general meeting at the child's school, attend a school event, and to volunteer at the school compared with control group parents. Parental involvement among the experimental group, in contrast, was lower than among parents in the control group. The researchers speculate that this may be because parents who moved to the most affluent areas might not yet feel comfortable in those neighborhoods; they may be less accepted by school staff and other parents; or they may have less time to participate because of increased time spent commuting to work.

Among the children, there were only small differences across the three groups in school participation in such things as music or theater, sports, student government, and academic clubs. Children in the experimental group were more optimistic about their future (completing college, securing a well paid job, etc.), but differences across the three groups were not statistically significant.

### **Juvenile Delinquency and Crime**

The researchers also asked youth about any delinquent behavior, including graffiti, trespassing, hitting someone, stealing, destroying property, and carrying a weapon. At least 20% of the youth across all three groups reported doing at least one of these things. Section 8 youth had the lowest delinquency scores overall. They were also least likely to carry a weapon, to hit someone, or destroy property. Youth in the experimental group were least likely to trespass, spray-paint graffiti, or steal. They were, however, more likely than youth in the other two groups to hit someone or destroy property. It should be noted that these were self-reports of delinquency and therefore may be biased. In short, adolescent problem behavior was not lessened by moving to better neighborhoods. This is, in some respects, surprising, given that one might expect less delinquent behavior in communities with fewer deviant peers and more community control. However, it could also be that the youth still have access to old neighborhoods and peers, which was often the case in New York. Also, the youth may attach themselves to deviant peer groups in the new neighborhoods.

### **Policy Implications**

The findings from New York MTO point to improved parental employment, welfare use, and income. Health and well-being of the parents also improved. However, effects on children were more modest, and delinquency did not decline at all. That mental health among children improved may be promising for future delinquency, however, because early emotional and social problems are linked to subsequent crime and delinquency. Finally, the patterns of moving suggest that when families are not required to move to lower-poverty neighborhoods, they do not voluntarily make those moves on their own. ■

# The Effect of MTO on Baltimore Children's Educational Outcomes

Based on research by Jens Ludwig, Greg Duncan, and Helen Ladd<sup>1</sup>

**T**he Moving to Opportunity (MTO) project has examined various effects of moving to more affluent neighborhoods for low-income families, including the educational achievement of their children. Jens Ludwig, Greg Duncan, and Helen Ladd, who are analyzing data from the MTO research project in Baltimore, find that relocating families in public housing to low-poverty neighborhoods improves achievement among elementary school children, although the effects on teens are somewhat less clear.

Moving to better neighborhoods can improve education by providing access to better schools or to higher-achieving peers. It can improve the health and safety of children, allowing them to concentrate on school rather than on a myriad of stressors in their lives. Moving can also improve the mental and physical health of their parents, which can have positive ramifications for the children. On the other hand, students who move to better schools may face higher standards to which they are not accustomed, as well as different standards for behavior. They may also be singled out in the classroom or may face greater surveillance. Each of these factors might lead to poorer measured outcomes in the short-term.

## Study Description

Ludwig, Duncan, and Ladd followed 1,243 Baltimore children whose parents were participating in the MTO project, grouped by age (5–11, 12–18) for five years (1993–94–1998–98 academic years).<sup>2</sup> They measured achievement with scores from two standardized tests: the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) and the Maryland Functional Test (MFT). The CTBS tests achievement in math and reading skills for elementary and middle-school children. The scores are normed to a national distribution. The MFT is required of Maryland students to graduate high school. The test measures achievement in reading, writing, math, and citizenship. The tests are taken as early as seventh grade and are repeated until the student passes. The researchers also looked at disciplinary actions (suspensions), absences, special education, dropout rates, and grade retention (being held back). The authors have, on average, 4.5 academic years of data on each MTO child.

The participating families were drawn from the larger MTO study, which randomly assigned families living in public housing to three groups. Members of the first, the experimental group, were given support services and rent-subsidy vouchers that required them to move to a low-poverty neighborhood. The second, Section 8, group was given vouchers but with no restrictions on where they could move. A control

group was given neither assistance nor vouchers (see inset, page 6, for a description of the MTO project design).

More than three-quarters of the Baltimore families in the Section 8 group moved. Of the movers, only about 10% moved to a low-poverty neighborhood. Some 58% of the families in the experimental group moved as part of the program, virtually all of whom moved to low-poverty neighborhoods and 40% of whom left Baltimore City entirely. Families in the control group were free to move as well, but fewer than 5% moved to low-poverty neighborhoods. These clear differences in relocation outcomes across the three groups provide a reliable comparison of the effects of neighborhood and residential mobility on educational outcomes.

## School Performance of Elementary and Middle-School Students

The effects of the MTO program on educational outcomes are much more evident for young children than for teens. To provide some context, the control group's educational outcomes deteriorate over time, both relative to national norms and among their own peers. The use of special education services increases steadily over time. Grade retention, school absences, and disciplinary problems all peak in the early or mid-teen years for control group children.

The offer to move as part of the MTO project (families from both the experimental and Section 8 groups) seems to slow the rate of decline in test scores, at least for younger children. However, participation in the MTO program also appears to increase the rate of grade retention. This could be due to higher standards in the new schools, or to greater vigilance by teachers.

Specifically, reading and math scores of children in both experimental and Section 8 families improved compared with those in the control group, and the improvements were most pronounced among the experimental group. Children ages 5–11 in the experimental group were 18 percentage points more likely to pass the MFT reading test, roughly

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2. Also see, see Greg J. Duncan and Jens Ludwig "Housing Vouchers Help Poor Children? Children's Roundtable Report #3—July 2000." Brookings Institution. Available online at <http://www.brookings.org/comm/ChildrensRoundtable/Issue3/issue3.htm>.

double the rate of the control group. The reading and math scores on the CTBS tests of experimental children were about 7 percentage points higher than those in the control group (see Table 1). However, there were no statistically significant differences in special education placements, absences, grade retention, or disciplinary problems between control and experimental groups (see Table 2).

Among the Section 8 families, reading scores on the CTBS also improved, but not as dramatically. The CTBS reading scores improved by about 6 percentage points over the control group. They were also about 6 percentage points more likely to pass the MFT reading test, although given the small number of observations, this is not a statistically significant difference (see Table 1). Math scores on the CTBS were not significantly different. There were also no differences in special education, absences, grade retention, or disciplinary actions (see Table 2).

Logically, the impact of moving to a better neighborhood should improve over time, as the children settle into their new environments. There is some suggestive evidence that this may be the case. Performance on math and reading tests improved slightly each year over the first three years, with some drop-off in the fourth. The drop-off can likely be attributed to smaller sample sizes. Youth in the experimental group also were increasingly likely to be placed in special education, while the likelihood among those in the Section 8 group leveled off. However, none of the differences was statistically

significant.

Although it is impossible from this data to determine whether or how the new neighborhoods improve achievement—there are simply too many other reasons, from family environment, to afterschool supports, to peers that can influence outcomes—past research does point to some possibilities. In-school interventions, for example, seem to have a greater effect on math than reading scores, while home and other out-of-school environments have a greater effect on reading. The positive effects in this study on both reading and math might suggest that it is not only the schools that matter here.

### School Performance of Teens

The results for teens were more mixed. For administrative reasons, reliable data are only available for teens for the MFT reading test. The analysis found no statistically significant

differences between either the experimental or Section 8 groups relative to the control group in MFT reading scores (see Table 1). However, students in the experimental group were more likely to be retained in a grade after moving, and they were more likely to be suspended or expelled (see Table 2). They were also more likely to drop out, although this should be qualified because the measure of dropping out used was far from perfect.<sup>3</sup> Students in the Section 8 group were also more likely to be retained a grade after moving to a lower-

**Table 1. Differences between Baltimore MTO Experimental and Section 8 Groups Compared with Control Group, on Reading and Math (percentage point difference)**

	MFT	CTBS	
	Reading	Reading	Math
<b>Experimental</b>			
Teens	.073	NA	NA
Elementary school	.178**	7.34**	7.48**
<b>Section 8</b>			
Teens	-.009	NA	NA
Elementary school	.059	6.39**	1.48

NA = scores not available; teens do not take the CTBS  
 Teen sample is restricted to MTO children older than age 12 at random assignment. Elementary sample is restricted to children ages 5-11 at random assignment.  
 \*\* Statistically significant at the 5% level.

**Table 2. Differences between Baltimore MTO Experimental and Section 8 Groups Compared with Control Group, on Other Educational Outcomes (percentage point difference)**

	Experimental vs. Control	Section 8 vs. Control
<b>Elementary Age</b>		
Absences (days)	.57	1.1
Grade retention (% retained)	-.013	.002
Disciplinary actions	-.015	.001
Special education	.043	.052
<b>Teens</b>		
Absences (days)	2.06	1.78
Grade retention (% retained)	.065**	.109**
Disciplinary actions	.086*	.088
Special education	-.017	.013
Dropout	.062*	.019

Disciplinary actions include the fraction suspended or expelled during the year. Teen sample is restricted to MTO children older than age 12 at random assignment.

\* Statistically significant at the 10% level

\*\* Statistically significant at the 5% level.

poverty neighborhood.

The higher rates of retention may be good or bad news, or perhaps no news at all. One possibility is that the academic and other outcomes of MTO teens change little as a result of the experiment, but grade retention becomes more likely among experimental and Section 8 teens because of different academic and behavioral standards in their new, lower-poverty schools. On the other hand, increased rates of grade retention among the MTO mobility groups may reflect either an increase in the prevalence of academic or behavioral problems, or discrimination on the part of teachers or administrators.

Given the different patterns of socialization, and the greater exposure among boys to risk, outside influences, and other potential distractions, one would expect to find a difference in school outcomes between boys and girls. However, the effects on educational outcomes appear to be just as large for both boys and girls. Even looking at suspensions and other disciplinary outcomes, no differences emerge.

### Policy Implications

Overall, the results indicate that residential mobility policies may have quite positive impacts on the school performance of children in elementary school, but the results are far less conclusive for adolescents, given the limited academic measures that are available for this group in the Maryland data. In the case of MTO, the added costs of counseling and services to the experimental families above and beyond that required to relocate them are roughly \$1,900 per family. How does this compare to other policies that might be considered for children in poor urban neighborhoods? The costs of lowering class size in urban schools from 22 to 13 students compared with the costs of moving the students out of the urban school system are similar. Reducing class size incurs costs of roughly \$2,151 per student. The MTO program is thus at least as cost-effective as reducing class sizes as a means for improving academic achievement, and perhaps more so given that each family typically has more than one child.

Because the MTO program participants are a self-selected group of families, there remains some uncertainty about whether residential-mobility programs would produce similar effects for more representative populations of public housing residents. Nevertheless, initial findings from the MTO demonstration are sufficiently encouraging to warrant additional research and policy attention to the potential of residential-mobility strategies. ■

3. The education records used did not directly indicate whether students dropped out of school. Students were considered to have dropped out if they had missing school data for a given academic year and had data available for the two prior years, and were age 15 on September 1 of the academic year in which data are missing. Because schools may retain dropouts on their rosters for financial reasons, the study also categorized those students with 120 or more absences as dropouts.

## MTO Site Information

### Baltimore

Five census tracts:

- average poverty rate: 67%
- 8 public housing projects (four low-rise and four high-rise family projects),
- public housing population: 3,807 households.
- average household income: \$6,880,
- public assistance receipt: 46%
- family composition: 99.6% African-American; 84% single mothers

### Boston

Seven census tracts:

- average poverty rate: 49.2%
- 8 public housing projects
- public housing population: 2,578 households.
- average household income: \$10,230
- public assistance receipt: 72%
- family composition: 51% white (including Hispanics); 45% African-American;

### Chicago

Four census tracts:

- average poverty rate: 67%
- 6 public housing projects
- public housing population: 2,197 households.
- average household income: \$7,114,
- public assistance receipt: 75%
- family composition: 99.4% African-American; 70% single mothers

### Los Angeles

Nine census tracts:

- average poverty rate: 54%
- 11 public housing projects
- public housing population: 3,634 households.
- average household income: \$9,607
- public assistance receipt: 61%
- family composition: 58.4% Hispanic; 38.5% African-American

### New York

Twelve census tracts:

- average poverty rate: 47.3%
- 14 public housing projects
- public housing population: 15,934 households.
- average household income: \$11,771
- public assistance receipt: 32%
- family composition: 45.2% Hispanic; 57.5% African-American

Source: HUD

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# The Social Context of New Neighborhoods among MTO Chicago Families

Emily Rosenbaum<sup>1</sup>

Over the past decade, researchers have increasingly focused on identifying the role that neighborhoods play in impeding or promoting the positive development of children and youth. The accumulated evidence indicates that neighborhoods matter; more specifically, that living among socially and economically advantaged neighbors can have positive influences on a range of behaviors and outcomes for children and youth (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber, 1997; Ellen and Turner, 1998; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

However, such “neighborhood effects” studies often suffer from methodological problems, including self-selection bias. Given that families have at least some degree of choice in where they will live, it is difficult to distinguish whether the effects of neighborhood on children stem from characteristics of the neighborhood itself or from unobserved family attributes related both to neighborhood choice and to children’s outcomes. From a research perspective, one of the most important features of Moving to Opportunity (MTO) is its controlled experimental design, and thus its potential to avoid selection bias and identify the existence, strength, and nature of neighborhood effects more accurately than survey-based studies (see sidebar, page 6, for a description of the MTO study and design).

Although it is too early in the MTO study to be able to determine the effects on such long-term outcomes as children’s education and a mother’s self-sufficiency, in the short term, MTO can provide insight into the kinds of mechanisms that may ultimately give rise to long-term outcomes. Many of these mechanisms involve social processes and interactions that have eluded many empirical studies of neighborhood effects.

Focusing on a sample of experimental- and comparison-group families that moved as part of the Chicago MTO program, we address two questions: Does participation in MTO enable both experimental- and comparison-group families to move to better neighborhoods? And second, how do the families’ experiences differ depending on program-group assignment?

To answer the first question, we compare data from a survey conducted by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) at the outset of the MTO program (conducted with all families on acceptance into the program) with data collected after the Chicago mover families had moved to their new neighborhoods. For the second question, we compare the post-move experiences of families from the two program groups. The community characteristics we

examine—including feelings of safety, experiences with crime, and perceptions of social and physical disorder—may act as mediating factors that precede long-term gains in education and employment.

## Social Disorganization

One of the most comprehensive theoretical approaches to understanding how neighborhood characteristics can influence the behaviors and attainments of individuals is social disorganization theory. Social organization refers to the social processes and relationships that reflect, for example, shared norms, the presence and strength of both formal and informal networks in the neighborhood, and the ability of neighbors to achieve common goals, enforce norms of acceptable (public) behavior, and pass on these standards to children and youth (Elliot et al., 1996; Furstenberg and Hughes, 1997; Sampson, 1997). Extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods are less socially organized than more advantaged neighborhoods because the structural aspects of disadvantage (e.g., high levels of poverty and joblessness) tend to break down the relationships that lie at the heart of social organization. Social organization, then, bridges the gap between structural features of the neighborhood and individual-level behaviors, choices, and decisions.

Neighborhood characteristics with perhaps the greatest potential to weaken or destroy an area’s social organization are crime and violence. This is most vividly illustrated in some of Chicago’s most notorious public housing developments. In many of these developments, the constant warfare between rival gangs causes law-abiding residents to withdraw into the relative safety of their units and isolate themselves and their children from their neighbors (who are often responsible for the crime and violence). Moreover, the very real threat of retaliation by gang members often prohibits those who would otherwise work together for the good of the community. The fact that the majority of participating families in all five MTO sites cited the desire to escape crime and violence as a key reason for wanting to move indicates that the consequences of crime and violence are not unique to Chicago.

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## Degree of Disorganization in Neighborhoods: Baseline Survey

The answers that participating families in Chicago gave on HUD's baseline survey reveal the lack of social organization in their original neighborhoods. Among a subset of 81 families with a child ages 6–17 in Chicago, very few mothers reported feeling very safe in four specific situations prior to moving: near the local school, at home alone at night, and on the streets near home during the day or at night.<sup>2</sup> In fact, none of the comparison group mothers reported feeling safe on the streets near home during the day or at night. In addition, both experimental and comparison group mothers nearly universally reported problems of social and physical disorder (trash, graffiti, people drinking in public, drug dealers or users, and abandoned buildings) in their origin neighborhoods.

The mothers also had a somewhat circumscribed circle of trusted friends in their original neighborhoods. Although the majority of mothers in both groups (74% in the comparison and 55% in the experimental group) believed that it was very likely that they would tell their neighbor if that neighbor's child were misbehaving, far fewer thought it was very likely that their neighbors would tell them about their own child's misbehavior (58% of the comparison group and 43% of the experimental group). In short, fewer mothers believed their willingness to intervene would be reciprocated. Indeed, it appears that relatively few mothers believed they could trust their neighbors to enforce their own parenting norms, indicating an absence of collective socialization.

### Moving to "Opportunity": Post-Move Survey

To what extent has participation in MTO enabled families to move to areas with higher levels of social organization? Does the requirement that experimental families move to low-poverty neighborhoods mean that they move to areas with even greater levels of social organization than those to which comparison families move? We can address these questions using data from our post-move survey. Table 1 contains information (again based on the subset of mothers with children aged 6–17 who moved) on the degree of social organization in new neighborhoods, including items identical to those in the baseline and items unique to the post-move survey.

We find that both groups of mothers are significantly more likely to report feeling very safe in all four situations (near the local school, at home alone at night, and on the streets

2. The analyses summarized here refer specifically to families with at least one child age 6–17. We interviewed 120 of the 234 mover families for whom we had received contact information, and 81 of these families contained a child age 6–17. Of these 81 families, 49 were in the experimental group and 32 were in the comparison group. Other analyses conducted for the entire sample are consistent with those summarized here. The percentages of comparison group and experimental group mothers who report feeling very safe in these four situations never exceeded 10%.

## Who Joined MTO?

The typical family entering the MTO program consisted of a minority woman and her three children:

- Almost two-thirds were African American, almost one-third Hispanic.
- Over 90% were single-parent families.
- Three-quarters were primarily dependent on welfare benefits for income.
- Roughly 20% were employed at baseline.

The families who joined the MTO are significantly different than the general public housing population in several ways. MTO household heads are slightly younger, more often female, and more likely to be Hispanic. MTO families also have slightly lower incomes, are less likely to be employed, and have higher rates of welfare use than the general public housing population, suggesting that MTO has not taken only the most successful public housing families.

The main motivations for wanting to move were crime and fear.

Over three-quarters of the applicants said getting away from drugs and gangs was the most important reason for wanting to move, and they reported high rates of criminal victimization. Nearly half of those interviewed mentioned getting a bigger or better apartment or having better schools for their children as a reason for moving, but these were clearly less important motivating factors.

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during the day and at night) in their new versus their old neighborhoods (with all of these premove-postmove differences achieving a high degree of statistical significance). This suggests that all families have moved to neighborhoods with significantly more social control.

However, experimental-group mothers are far more likely than the mothers in the comparison group to report feeling very safe in three of the four situations in their new neighborhoods, suggesting that they were more successful than comparison-group families in moving to neighborhoods with greater levels of social control. For example, although

**Table 1.** Selected Indicators of the Social Organization in Children’s Destination Neighborhoods, Based on Reports by Mothers, by Program Group Status

Indicator	Program-group status	
	Comparison	Experimental
<b>Feeling very safe</b>		
In parking lots & streets near local school	20.00 <sup>a</sup>	50.00*** <sup>b</sup>
At home alone at night	46.88 <sup>b</sup>	48.98 <sup>b</sup>
On streets near home during the day	28.13 <sup>b</sup>	45.83*** <sup>b</sup>
On streets near home at night	28.13 <sup>b</sup>	40.43* <sup>b</sup>
<b>Reported problems in neighborhood with:</b>		
Trash	56.25 <sup>b</sup>	28.57*** <sup>b</sup>
Graffiti	18.75 <sup>b</sup>	8.16 <sup>b</sup>
People drinking in public	43.75 <sup>b</sup>	6.12*** <sup>b</sup>
Drug users/dealers	46.88 <sup>b</sup>	16.67*** <sup>b</sup>
Abandoned buildings	28.13 <sup>b</sup>	8.16* <sup>b</sup>
People saying insulting things or bothering others	25.00	4.26***
Crime and violence	61.29	22.45***
Lots of people who can’t find jobs	72.41	44.44***
<b>Social interactions/ties in neighborhood</b>		
Very likely would tell neighbor about their child	83.87	91.67 <sup>b</sup>
Very likely neighbor would tell me about my child	70.97	80.95 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Feelings of neighborhood attachment</b>		
“This is a good neighborhood for me to live in”	71.87	93.88***
“I feel at home in this neighborhood”	90.62	95.92
“It is important for me to live in this neighborhood”	40.63	76.60***
“I expect to stay here for a long time”	40.63	67.35***
“I can recognize many of the people who live in this neighborhood”	62.50	64.20
“If there is a problem in this neighborhood, people here can get it solved”	65.63	77.22**

\*  $p < .10$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*\*  $p < .001$ , one-tailed test.

<sup>a</sup> Differences between baseline and post-move survey are significant at  $p < .05$ , one-tailed test.

<sup>b</sup> Differences between baseline and post-move survey are significant at  $p < .001$ , one-tailed test.

50% of experimental-group mothers reported feeling very safe near the local school in their new neighborhood, only 20% of comparison-group mothers felt as safe in that situation (see Table 1). A similar magnitude of difference is seen with respect to feeling very safe on the streets near home during the day (45.8% versus 28.1%) and at night (40.4% versus 28.1%), with all three of these differences statistically significant.

Similar findings emerge for reported problems with social and physical disorder. That is, both groups of mothers are far less likely to report problems with trash, graffiti, people

drinking in public, drug dealers or users, and abandoned buildings in their new neighborhoods than they were in their old neighborhoods (with all differences highly statistically significant). Again, experimental-group mothers were significantly less likely to report these problems in their new neighborhoods than control-group mothers. For example, 43% of mothers in the comparison group reported public drinking while only 6% of experimental mothers reported such drinking in their new neighborhoods (see Table 1).

These differences again suggest that experimental-group families’ destination neighborhoods have higher levels of

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social organization than neighborhoods to which comparison-group families moved. This conclusion is strengthened by the additional finding that experimental-group mothers are far less likely to report problems with incivility (i.e., “people saying insulting things”), crime and violence, and widespread idleness (i.e., “lots of people who can’t find jobs”) in their new neighborhoods, indicators of disorder that were available in the post-move survey but not in the baseline survey.

Turning to the results relating to social ties and interactions, the data again suggest that experimental-group families were better able to move to neighborhoods with higher levels of social control. That is, while the percentages of both groups of mothers reporting that they or their neighbors would share information concerning children’s misbehavior in their new neighborhoods are statistically similar, significantly more experimental-group mothers perceive such networks in their new versus their old neighborhoods.

With respect to feelings of attachment to their new neighborhoods, we asked mothers to indicate if each of five statements was either true or false. On two of the five statements (“I can recognize many of the people who live in this neighborhood” and “I feel at home in this neighborhood”), there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups. However, significantly more experimental-group mothers believed that their new neighborhoods were good places for them to live, that it is important for them to live in their new neighborhood, that they expect to remain there for a long time, and, if there were a problem, their neighbors could get it solved. This last indicator may be the most significant with respect to social organization because it reflects a perception of collective solidarity and of the effectiveness of their neighbors, and the extent to which norms concerning problems are shared.

### Policy Implications

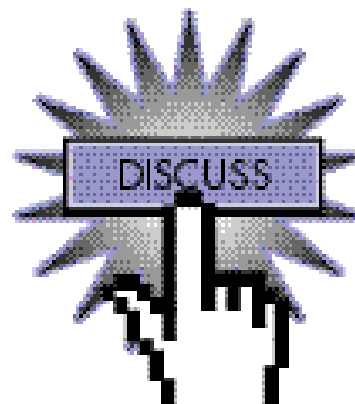
Survey data collected from families that moved under the Chicago MTO program suggest that all families moved to neighborhoods with greater social organization, but especially those in the experimental group. This conclusion is particularly evident in the dramatic improvements in safety voiced by both groups and the fact that getting away from crime and violence was the most cited reason for wanting to move. Although it may be too early to evaluate how such gains in neighborhood conditions may affect long-term social and economic outcomes, research from other sites has demonstrated improvements in psychological well-being. Such improvements are clearly linked to living in environments free of the constant danger, such as that in public housing. Many of the Chicago mothers pointed to this in our conversations, telling us that the things they liked most about their new neighborhoods were the peace and quiet, the absence of shooting, and the freedom they gained by having

confidence in their own safety and, particularly, the safety of their children. Thus, although the long-term evaluations of MTO will help us to better understand the presence and nature of neighborhood effects on many other social and economic outcomes, it is clear that, in the short term, the MTO program has helped families gain access to neighborhoods that can possibly enhance family well-being and the future life chances of youth.

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