

**Can Expanded Housing and Neighborhood Choice Improve
School Outcomes for Low-Income Children?:
Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment**

Xavier de Souza Briggs

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Kadija S. Ferryman and Susan J. Popkin

The Urban Institute

María Rendón

Harvard University

DRAFT June 12, 2006

Please do not cite or quote without permission.

Comments welcome at xbriggs@mit.edu

Abstract. Educational failure is one of the most devastating problems associated with ghetto poverty in America and educational improvement among the most important effects reported by the Gautreaux housing desegregation. Gautreaux inspired Moving to Opportunity (MTO), a federal experiment in voluntary “assisted mobility.” Yet four to seven years in, the experimental group showed no measurable impacts on school outcomes, and modest differences in school quality, for children whose families had initially moved out of high-poverty public housing and into low-poverty neighborhoods. We use qualitative interviewing and ethnographic fieldwork to find out why. Moving on to poorer neighborhoods and choosing weak schools limited exposure to better ones. Where children did not attend assigned schools, parental choices were typically driven by poor information, an emphasis on safety and order but not academic excellence, and, in some cases, by the desire to make familiar schools an oasis of stability amidst the disruptions of relocation.

Introduction

Can helping low-income families meet the high cost of housing and move to “better” neighborhoods lead to better school outcomes for children? Low-income families often face high housing costs that overwhelm their budgets and compel many to live in high-poverty, high-risk neighborhoods, typically in distressed inner cities or older suburbs. In these areas, children and adults alike tend to have poor outcomes in education and the labor market, and they report some of the worst physical and mental health in the nation (Brooks-Gunn, Aber and Duncan 1997; Ellen and Turner 2003; Orr et al. 2003). Because most public school enrollments track the segregation of neighborhoods, schools in these communities also face severe disadvantages and tend to show higher failure rates, as well as more severe safety problems, than schools in other areas.

Millions of families who live in public housing or use housing vouchers in large urban areas live in such distressed neighborhoods (Cunningham and Droesch 2005; Goering, Kamey and Richardson 1994; Newman and Schnare 1997). Yet officially, it is the long-standing aim of the nation’s housing policy to ensure “a decent home” as well as “a suitable living environment” for all families, and the importance of the neighborhood environment has been re-affirmed by numerous national commissions including the bipartisan Millennial Housing Commission, established by Congress in 2000, to address America’s critical housing needs.¹ How has housing policy, then, addressed this gap between rhetoric and reality?

With the creation of the federal rental voucher program in 1974, families receiving government housing assistance were, in principle, able to use their subsidy, in the private rental market, to move away from poor and high-risk communities. While reducing severe rent burden was the program’s main aim (Khadduri 2006), policymakers and advocates have repeatedly emphasized access to better neighborhoods as well—all the more with the focus on deconcentrating poverty that followed public and scholarly debate about a socially and economically isolated “underclass” in inner-city neighborhoods (Goetz 2003; Orr et al. 2003; Wilson 1987). But studies of voucher outcomes suggest: that the program does relatively little to encourage *or* enable families to live in more resource-rich areas; that many low-income families, especially racial minorities, face major barriers to doing so (Basolo and Nguyen 2006; Newman and Schnare 1997; Orr et al. 2003; Pashup et al. 2006; Pendall 2000); and that these families do not wish, in all cases, to do so—in part because they fear a loss of access to informal (or

¹ See Bipartisan Millennial Housing Commission (2002). The pledge to “a decent home and a suitable living environment” is in the Housing Act of 1949. See Newman and Schnare (1997).

“social”) resources, in the form of supportive friends and relatives, as opposed to being focused on better access to formal, institutional resources, in the form of public or nonprofit services (Briggs 1997).

The stakes are high, since the federal housing assistance programs that serve over 3 million low and very low-income renter families—the public housing and the rental voucher programs—now represent a larger government expenditure than welfare (cash assistance to needy families). For this reason, innovative “assisted mobility” programs target better *locational* outcomes through vouchers or other program tools, and there is some evidence that these programs help produce better *social* outcomes for children and families as well, such as improved health, education, and economic self-sufficiency. In 1994, based largely on the evidence from a housing desegregation program in Chicago, and with \$70 million in a special appropriation by Congress, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched Moving to Opportunity (MTO). MTO aims to rigorously test the idea that relocating from high poverty to low poverty areas will improve the lives of disadvantaged children and families who receive housing assistance. MTO is the first randomized housing experiment to test this important idea.

MTO is a voluntary relocation program. Local program managers invited very low-income residents of public housing, all in high-poverty neighborhoods of Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York to participate (Goering and Feins 2003; Orr et al.2003). Over 5,300 families, most of whom were African American or Hispanic, applied, and just over 4,600 met basic eligibility requirements. These families were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups: a control group (families retained their public housing unit but received no new assistance), a Section 8 comparison group (families received the standard counseling and voucher subsidy, for use in the private market), or an experimental group. The experimental-group families received *special relocation counseling* (focused on opportunities to live in low poverty areas) and *search assistance*. They also received a voucher useable only in a low poverty neighborhood (less than 10 percent poor as of the 1990 census), with the requirement that the family live there for at least a year. Of the 1,820 families assigned to the experimental group, just under half (48 percent or 860) found a suitable apartment and moved successfully (“leased up”).

Yet four to seven years into the program, the experimental group showed no measurable impacts on school outcomes, and modest differences in school quality, for children whose families had initially moved out of high-poverty public housing and into low-poverty neighborhoods. We use qualitative interviewing and ethnographic fieldwork to find out why. In this paper, we review evidence on MTO’s impacts on education and present new findings on parents’ housing and school choice decisions—both crucial factors in the experiment’s education results so far.

In brief, we find that ongoing housing mobility, including moving on to poor and risky neighborhoods (not necessarily the ones left behind), plus parental school choices, undermined experimental-group children’s exposure to significantly better schools than those attended by the control and comparison groups. Where children did not attend assigned schools, i.e. where the housing choice was not the de facto school choice, parental school choices were typically driven by: poor information (obtained mostly from similarly ill-informed relatives and friends); an emphasis on safety and order but not academic excellence; and, in some cases, the desire to make familiar schools an oasis of stability amidst the disruptions of moving.

Our results and policy recommendations address the important links among housing assistance, housing and neighborhood choices, school options and choices, and the educational outcomes of low-income, mostly minority children in elementary and secondary

schools. More specifically, these results also suggest the potential and limits of a relocation-only strategy to change educational options and outcomes for disadvantaged children and their families.

How might the neighborhood environment affect school outcomes?

A substantial body of research has found that residents of distressed inner-city neighborhoods have significantly poorer life outcomes, on average, than those who live in nonpoor areas. But are neighborhoods to blame? Research suggests several ways that poor neighborhoods *may* contribute to poor outcomes, including less effective public services, weaker job networks and social isolation, a competitive disadvantage as jobs sprawl further from the urban core (“spatial mismatch”), norms and pressure that encourage risky behavior by young people and adults alike, the absence of role models, and related factors (Ellen and Turner 2003; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). For some of these pathways, people who share a neighborhood must interact and create a *social world* for influence to operate, but for other pathways, place may matter simply as a *location* that provides more or less exposure to opportunities (such as entry-level jobs) or risks (such as being victimized by crime) (Briggs 2004).

These factors suggest, conversely, how moving to a “better” neighborhood might influence educational achievement, for example by giving children access to: more resource-rich and high-performing schools, with better instruction and supports; and positive peer groups made up of young people who are more confident that education will pay off for them. These positive pathways might lead to healthier aspirations, better attendance, more study time, or other educational *effort* and, in turn, to better *attainment* (school completion) and *achievement* (grades and test scores).

On the other hand, we must also consider how moving to new neighborhoods and schools could have negative consequences for those who move. For example, low-income children might respond negatively to competition with more advantaged peers (Rosenbaum 1995), or teachers might single out the newcomers for sanctions (Carter 2003, Skiba et. al 2000). Also, research has shown that moving itself, even to a more resource-rich environment, can be very disruptive for children’s education and social development—and that multiple moves can be even more damaging (Hartman 2002).

The research that has most directly informed the MTO demonstration, as well as efforts to evaluate it, is a series of studies on the outcomes of families who participated in the Gautreaux housing desegregation program in metropolitan Chicago. The Gautreaux program enabled about 7,000 very low-income families, many of whom lived in Chicago’s notorious public housing high rises, to move to mostly white, middle income suburban communities with much better performing public schools.² In general, Gautreaux parents who moved to the suburbs reported more concerned teachers with more resources to help their children, as well as student peers who worked harder, were less disruptive, and were more likely to expect to go on to college than the peers left behind in Chicago’s inner-city schools.

After nearly a decade had passed, follow-up research found that many of these suburban movers struggled, for a time, with higher standards and unfamiliar cultural

² The Gautreaux “class” (those eligible for the program) included current public housing residents, former residents (including those who had lived in Chicago public housing as children), and households on the waiting list for housing assistance in Chicago (Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum 2000). By contrast, MTO was limited to families currently living in high-poverty public housing developments in the five study sites. There is evidence that the MTO population was significantly more disadvantaged, at time of enrollment in the mid 1990s, than Gautreaux families had been in the late 1970s (Pashup et. al 2006)

expectations in their new schools and also that the mover children's grades dropped (in part because standards were so much higher). Yet when compared to a second group of movers who stayed in Chicago (and whose children stayed in its public schools), the suburban mover children were more likely to have completed high school and gone on to college (Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum 2000; Kaufman and Rosenbaum 1992). The Gautreaux program did not include an experimental design and did not follow families who failed to successfully move to the suburbs or who moved out and then back to the inner city, making it difficult to attribute effects to location (Orr et al. 2003; Popkin et al. 2000). But the Gautreaux study's compelling, positive findings were a major factor in Congress' decision, in 1992, to authorize the MTO demonstration.

Why launch a social experiment? What is MTO testing?

Studies of "neighborhood effects" on child and family well-being struggle with the fact that families are not randomly sorted into neighborhoods. Because different families make different housing choices, life outcomes—and the processes that shape them—may reflect key traits of families and not necessarily the influences of their neighborhood environment. To further complicate the puzzle, important neighborhood influences appear to be *managed* differently by different types of families, meaning that traits of families and of neighborhoods interact and may shift over time (Ellen and Turner 2003; Furstenberg et al. 1999). In general, a randomized social experiment is the best way to determine the impact of neighborhoods over and above family-level influence. Because participants in the MTO demonstration were randomly assigned to treatment groups, the effects of the "treatment" (intervention) should be attributable to the experiment rather than to the characteristics of the families (Orr et al. 2003).

But what, in fact, *is* the treatment, and what is MTO testing? Like other "social" experiments, MTO has evolved in the real world and not under controlled laboratory conditions. And several developments, over the decade since random assignment, have made MTO a less-than-pure test of neighborhood effects on families. First, recall that about half of the experimental group did not successfully move to low poverty areas at the outset. While these families are still a part of MTO's tracking and results, they did not receive the treatment intended. While outcomes for each subgroups ("compliers" and "noncompliers") can be reported separately, of course, public discussions of the experiment's results can all too easily obscure nuances of experimental design and analysis, including the huge factor of program utilization or success rate—in plainer terms, the importance of distinguishing the question of how effective or ineffective the treatment is *for those who receive it* from that of *what shapes access and successful utilization* in the first place.³ Second, some of those who did successfully move to low poverty neighborhood decided to move again, some time after the required year of residence, and some of these families moved on to poorer neighborhoods, often citing problems with their housing unit or landlord (Orr et al. 2003). After the initial placement, even families in the experimental group did not receive additional relocation counseling or special assistance, so there was nothing to specifically encourage families to choose another low poverty neighborhood when they moved on. But the larger point is that many of the hoped-for social

³ The Gautreaux Two housing mobility program in Chicago has served a population with levels of disadvantage comparable to MTO (rather than to the original Gautreaux program) and, like MTO, imposed certain locational restrictions. Researchers explain Gautreaux Two's relatively low lease-up rate (36%) in terms of external factors (a tight rental market, discrimination against minorities and voucher holders, and bureaucratic delays) as well as internal factors (limited program comprehension, large household size, and health problems) (Pashup et al. 2006). These and other barriers, including limited time and transportation, appear to have limited lease-ups in MTO (Orr et al. 2003; Shroder 2002) and the regular voucher program (Popkin and Cunningham 1999).

effects of “better” neighborhoods depend on exposure over time, for example forging useful ties to new peers and community institutions—a process that repeat moving undermines (Briggs 2004).

Third, the low poverty areas that served as initial destinations for the experimental group, like neighborhoods nationwide, have changed over time. Census data show that they were becoming poorer, for example, in the 1990s (Orr et al. 2003), even as many inner-city neighborhoods were become less poor due to gentrification (in-migration by higher income households) and income gains by the poor. So the geography of risk and opportunity (Briggs 2005; Galster and Killen 1995) is no doubt shifting as the experiment evolves and families experience important changes in their lives. Fourth, about 70 percent of the control group had also moved out of public housing, albeit mostly to poor urban neighborhoods, some four to seven years after random assignment, when an Interim Impacts Evaluation was conducted (see below). Public housing demolitions and revitalization programs, which received a major boost from federal policy in the 1990s, are one big reason for these control-group moves. As a result, many members of the MTO control group are now movers too, not members of an in-place control group to serve as a fixed point of comparison.

Nevertheless, at the interim point that immediately preceded our fieldwork, families in the MTO experimental group were still more likely to be living in low poverty areas (whether the original placement areas or other areas), and had lived for longer periods of time in low poverty areas, than families in the other treatment groups (Orr et al. 2003). The experimental group has therefore had an exceptional experience that sharply contrasts with the dominant pattern for federal housing assistance nationwide. At this point, we can confidently assert that MTO is a test of at least two important things for low-income families who used to live in high poverty public housing projects: (a) the experience and effects of *living* in lower poverty neighborhoods over some period of time; and (b) the experience and effects of *relocating* (moving per se) to different types of neighborhoods, sometimes several times, while raising children and handling other challenges. Below, we will outline how we designed our study to learn as much as possible from MTO, taking into account the significant ways in which it has evolved over time. But first, we briefly review what other researchers have reported about MTO’s effects on educational outcomes so far.

MTO Findings on Educational Outcomes and the Role of School Choice

Although the Gautreaux results appeared to offer great promise for improving educational outcomes by helping low-income, mostly minority families relocate from high poverty to low poverty communities—and specifically to high-performing, middle-class suburban school districts—the research evidence thus far suggests that MTO has had relatively little impact on children’s school quality, academic performance or effort (study behaviors) (Sanbonmatsu et. al 2004; Orr et. al 2003). Although moving to neighborhoods with higher-quality schools was a priority reported by some families when signing up for the experiment, at four to seven years after random assignment, children in the MTO experimental group attended schools with only small advantages in performance, poverty rate, and exposure to white classmates, compared to the schools attended by control group children (Orr et. al 2003).⁴ This minimal difference is due, in part, to the fact that 70 percent of the experimental group (and 80

⁴ There is some evidence that school and district-level changes over the course of the experiment narrowed the gaps among schools in the three treatment groups. In part of because of aggressive school reform in some cities and because most (70%) of the control group moved at some point, control-group children were in schools with higher test scores and were more likely to be in magnet schools than they were at baseline.

percent of the subset who successfully moved) stayed in the same school district; some even kept their children in the same *schools* despite moving and having other school choices.

Consider that 88 percent of children in the Gautreaux suburban sample attended schools with standardized test scores at the national average or above (Rosenbaum 1995), but less than 10 percent of the MTO experimental-group children attended schools ranked at or above their state average in terms of mean test score (Orr et al. 2003). Notably, children who were living outside the original district were more likely than those who stayed in the same district (20 percent versus eight percent) to be in a school with average test scores at or above the state average, and this relative “locational success” varied significantly across the MTO sites. Finally, the neighborhoods and schools to which some MTO families moved were changing during this period, many becoming more minority and more poor.⁵ Since children in the MTO experimental group were in schools of only marginally higher quality at the interim mark, it is not surprising that there were no statistically significant differences between treatment groups on math and reading tests or other achievement measures.

But what kinds of school choice did MTO families, especially those in the experimental group, actually enjoy? Nationally, a large majority of children in public schools still attend “assigned” schools, and this is true for many families in the MTO program as well. That is, school enrollment is generally determined by neighborhood or other attendance zones, making parents “nonchoosers,” as education researchers term it. The family’s housing and neighborhood choice *is* its school choice, at least in terms of public education opportunities. But the share of children attending neighborhood schools has dropped over the past decade as magnet school programs, charter schools, and school voucher initiatives expand choice nationwide (Briggs 2005), and wider choice has been the rule in some MTO communities, such as Boston and New York, for years, whether at the high school level, in elementary and middle schools, or for all of these. The key question about school choice in MTO, then, is: How did families *who had meaningful school choices* make those choices? What were their priorities and challenges in making those choices? And did these choices help expose children to “better” schools that offered greater opportunities?

Education researchers have not addressed *housing* choice extensively, except to note that housing choices and prices within metropolitan housing markets are sensitive to school quality indicators, including major differences in average test scores across districts (Briggs 2005). But analyses of *school* choice have expanded and diversified rapidly in recent years, as school vouchers, charter schools, and other innovations grow in scale, variety, and visibility. The widely held view is that parents choose schools according to the three “p’s”: how well the school *performs*; how *pleasant* or welcoming it is (climate); and how *proximate* or close to home it is (Bell 2005). But considering the tremendous range of priorities and approaches expressed by parents, especially across class differences, researchers have proposed three ways of looking at school choice: resources, cultures, and choice sets.

The *resource* model compares parents by socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, and other dimensions according to the resources, such as time, transportation, and information, they can or do bring to bear in the choice process (review in Bell 2005). Like an earlier generation of studies (see, e.g., Jencks 1970), research in this vein emphasizes low-income parents’ lack of access to reliable information for making better school choices, from barriers to obtaining and using the information made available by institutional sources such as school staff to social

⁵ At the interim follow-up, experimental-group children and youth were more likely to be outside their origin district in greater Boston (32.9 percent) and Los Angeles (37.8 percent) than Baltimore (23.6), Chicago (18.3), or New York (13.8) (Orr et al. 2003).

networks of relatives and friends that are similarly situated and therefore ill equipped to provide effective advice (Bell 2005; Bulman 2004). A newer body of research argues that, resources aside, parents bring different *cultures* of decisionmaking—repertoires of school experience and beliefs about the role of schooling in their children’s lives—to bear on choices (Bulman 2004). Even middle class parents, for example, may differ widely on the degree to which the school environment should emphasize ethical values as opposed to narrower academic notions of achievement or the degree to which schools should help less academically inclined children to obtain practical vocational skills versus prepare for college.

Finally, Bell (2005) presents evidence on why differences in choice sets (“the actual markets within which parents choose”) matter as much as, or more than, differences in choice process by parents of different class status. As she notes, “the vast majority (up to 97%) of parents with children in failing schools choose to leave their children in those schools even when it is their legal right [under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001] to do otherwise” (p.1). Using qualitative interviews with “choosers,” Bell finds that parents quickly narrow their searches to limited sets, based on nominations by trusted contacts and also “customary attendance patterns” (where parents themselves or people they know have enrolled). This leads to big differences in the sets of schools that parents choose to investigate and from which they ultimately select, whether average failure rate, selectivity, or other measures were used to differentiate schools in each choice set. A number of these patterns were evident in the life histories, outlooks, and school choices of MTO families, as we explore below.

Tackling the puzzles in MTO: The Three-City study

The Three-City Study of Moving to Opportunity was designed to examine key puzzles that emerged in previous MTO research, in particular the survey-based and largely statistical Interim Impacts Evaluation (Orr et al. 2003). These puzzles include the modest differences in school quality and outcomes outlined above. We conducted our study in three of the five MTO sites: metropolitan Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. We focus on “how” and “why” questions: To better understand what statistical analyses of close-ended surveys have been unable to explain, we employed mostly qualitative methods. Qualitative approaches are particularly important for understanding why participants in social programs make the choices they do, as well as for understanding significant variation within treatment groups—differences among experimental-group families, for example—and not just across them.

Our family-level data were collected in 2004 and 2005—about six to ten years after families’ initial placement through the MTO program. First, we conducted 278 semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews with a stratified random sample of parents, adolescents, and young adults in all three treatment groups, including compliers and noncompliers in the experimental and comparison groups (sampling randomly within the stratum of families who had an adolescent child resident in the home at the time of the interview). Next, we launched “family-focused” ethnographic fieldwork (Burton 1997; Weisner 1996), visiting a subset of 37 families repeatedly over a period of six to eight months.⁶ In recruiting this subset, which included only control-group and experimental-group complier families (those who had successfully moved at the outset), we over-sampled, within the latter group, families who were still living in low poverty areas, including suburban school districts—considering these, at least on an *a priori* basis, to be

⁶ We interviewed 123 adults, 122 adolescents (ages 10-17), and 33 young adults (ages 18-13) in total. We oversampled families in Los Angeles because it was the site with the highest lease-up rate for MTO experimental group families and because there were a large number of families not included in the Interim Impacts Evaluation survey. Overall, we conducted 81 interviews in Boston, 120 in Los Angeles, and 77 in New York.

“locationally successful.”⁷ Statistical tests confirm that our samples closely resemble the much larger population of MTO families surveyed at the interim mark.⁸

The *qualitative interviews*, which were conducted in English, Spanish, and Cambodian, let us explore a variety of issues in depth and cover a wide range of outcomes (from very successful to highly distressed) for all three treatment groups, which is crucial for generating representative results. To enhance validity and extend our data, the *ethnographic fieldwork* added direct observation to what subjects report about their attitudes, choices, and outcomes. The ethnographic fieldwork also enabled us to ask key questions informally, as we built relationships with family members over months, while focusing on the core constructs of their lives, such as a daily routines to “get life accomplished” (Burton 1997), important social relations, and the details of connection (or lack of same) to the neighborhood of residence and other neighborhoods, such as those where relatives or close friends live. The ethnographic fieldwork was a blend of “naturalistic” or unstructured interviewing, semi-structured interviewing, and direct observation of family life inside and outside the home. The third element of the study, which we term *scans*, focuses on the changing contexts in which MTO families are leading their lives, for example the economic and social changes at the neighborhood, city, and metropolitan levels that are reshaping the “geography of opportunity” over time (Briggs 2005; Galster and Killen 1995). The scans analyze census and administrative data at the neighborhood, city, metropolitan region, and other levels.

The integration of distinct types of data is crucial for generating richer, more valid results and actionable specifics to guide decision-makers—“thick description with policy sense” (Briggs 1997). Mixed-method approaches are also crucial for building better theory.

Findings: School choice in context

Beyond the metro-wide demographic trends that appear to have produced some convergence among the treatment groups in terms of school quality, our data indicate two major reasons why an MTO-assisted relocation did not necessarily translate into significant and sustained improvements in school quality for many families in the experimental group. First, based on in-depth conversations with parents as well as children, subsequent moves clearly led many families away from stronger schools. Some experimental-group families did not remain in a low poverty neighborhood for an extended period of time, but instead moved on to poorer neighborhoods, sometimes close to their “old” neighborhood in the inner city. Second, and compounding the first factor, experimental-group families’ *assessment* of schools, *resources* for choice, and choice *priorities* (preferences) also contributed to keeping their children in low-performing schools—even when more academically promising choices appear to have been available. The first factor reminds us that housing and neighborhood choices *are* school choices for many families, but the second underlines the fact that the decisions parents make when they have wider school choice indeed matters. Most MTO parents were poorly informed about what their school choices included, emphasized safety and order as indicators of a “good” school,

⁷ We also drew a special sample of Southeast Asian refugee families at the Los Angeles site, because of the large number of refugee families receiving housing assistance in Los Angeles and other refugee gateway cities and the very limited research base on their special needs. We will focus on this special population in future reports.

⁸ In terms of *demographic* traits, the only statistically significant differences between our samples and the Interim Impacts Evaluation survey population is that we modestly under-sampled Hispanics and over-sampled families on welfare (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families). Our samples also closely resemble the Interim survey population in terms of *social outcomes*, in a variety of dimensions (health and mental health, education, employment, risky behavior). The data are available from the authors.

and struggled to balance a desire for better schools with caregiving, work, and other demands. Some mover parents also decided to make familiar schools a source of emotional and social stability for their children amidst the disruptions associated with moving to new neighborhoods.

Information poverty: How to determine “quality” schools?

Most MTO parents were “information poor” about school choice, and relocation itself did little to change that. In this, our findings echo a growing research literature on school choice, which indicates that most parents, and most notably low-income and minority parents, do not have any formal assistance or counseling when they choose schools for their children (Bulman 2004). Indeed, when they had school choices to make (and sometimes even when they officially did not), MTO parents often relied heavily on information provided by their networks of relatives and friends. For the most part, these contacts were also low-income people with limited education and knowledge of school options. Not only did MTO parents not receive formal counseling, then, but as other studies have shown, these parents’ social contacts were probably less “productive,” in terms of information quality and referral, than the contacts of higher-income parents tend to be (Bell 2005). Some word-of-mouth advice was valuable, however, and so we explore a range of patterns below.

Kia, an African-American pre-adolescent (age 11) in the experimental group whose family moved to an inner suburb of Boston, on to another suburb, and then back to Boston’s inner city, explained how her mother, Danielle, relied on her cousin’s assessment to make the latest school choice:

Q: How did you decide which school to go to?

A: I didn’t decide. It was my cousin Allana, and my mom just said, ‘she’ll see if that school is good’. If it’s not good, she’ll look into a different school.

Danielle’s choice to find a bigger apartment when her third child was born and the family’s relocation to the inner city where they could find such an apartment, led to a clear decline in the quality of the school environment for her other two daughters. The only clear advantage that Allana provided to Danielle was that she had slightly older children who had attended Boston schools. Yet Allana, a resident of the housing projects where the family once lived, was unable to provide them with genuinely useful information. The schools she recommended turned out to be highly disruptive and violent in addition to being low performing. Toward the end of our ethnographic fieldwork, Danielle had shifted her outlook on the new school from “wait and see” to real alarm (see text box on this family).

Danielle's family (MTO Boston, experimental group)

Danielle, an African-American single mother of two, was 33 when we interviewed her and began ethnographic visits in 2004. She had used her housing voucher and the MTO relocation assistance to leave a public housing development in inner-city Boston, where a number of her closest relatives lived and where Danielle herself grew up. She moved with her two young daughters, Shauna (now 12) and Kia (age 11), to Danvers, a mixed-income suburb north of Boston. Like most of the area suburbs that have some affordable rental housing, Danielle's first MTO community added racial and ethnic minorities throughout the 1990s and into the new decade. Yet in 2000, the average census tract in Danvers was still more than 96 percent white.

This first community was not easy for the family. Danielle remembers the neighbors in her apartment complex as unfriendly ("they would never say 'hi' to me") and thought them racially prejudiced as well: "They was scared of me ... when I would take out my girls to play, they would take their kids inside. How am I going to be hurting them with my two kids?" Before long, Danielle and her daughters were evicted from this first apartment due to a fight between her then boyfriend and her ex-boyfriend. Given what she perceived to be an unwelcoming climate there, however, Danielle told us she "wasn't about to stay there" anyhow.

Next, they moved to Brockton, a south suburb that lies along a corridor extending outward from the inner-city Boston neighborhoods—Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury—where blacks, including Danielle's relatives and friends, are concentrated in the city. Brockton's black population nearly doubled in the 1990s, and by 2000, blacks made up 22 percent of this small city's population. Danielle and her daughters liked Brockton and lived there for five years. By the time we began to visit them, they had just moved back to a high poverty neighborhood—and school—in inner-city Boston. It was a move made under duress and in a rush. Danielle had just given birth to her third child and wanted an additional bedroom. Danielle made clear throughout our months of visiting that providing materially for her girls, beyond the basics, was very important to her. But the first new apartment was above a detox center. Her landlord neglected the place, which was overrun with rats and physically decrepit. Only after threatening to call the local media was Danielle able to break her contract and get out, but the abrupt move meant that she had to take whichever three-bedroom apartment she could quickly find. This last move landed the family back in inner-city Boston, in a neighborhood close to Danielle's relatives in public housing. That was a big plus, she thought, but Danielle soon came to describe it to us as "the worst neighborhood" she had ever lived in.

Shauna and Kia missed the Brockton schools immediately. Shauna told us that the teachers there cared more and taught better. Her new peers were different, too. Shauna's biggest early impression of her new school was that the students were "meaner" and that "they mess with people." She explained the disorder: "Like if a kid be hitting you or messing with you, the teacher just tells you to sit back down on your desk." Our ethnographer asked, "What would they do in the [Brockton] school?" and Shauna answered emphatically, "They would go to the principal's office." She then described "teachers who don't teach," classes where "I sit there and do nothing."

Danielle's early assessment was that the new school (back in Boston) was "all right," though she had not visited it three months after they enrolled and even later acknowledged that she had little interaction with the teachers and staff. Months into our fieldwork, her view had soured. The girls in Shauna and Kia's new schools were "fast" (acting out in ways not appropriate for their age) and constantly fighting, not like in Brockton, Danielle said. "You see, my girls didn't grow up in these kinds of neighborhoods. They're not used to this. They bully Shauna sometimes ... Kia's gotten beat up." While much commentary on the inner city focuses on violence and disorder in the neighborhood, Danielle kept her children off the streets. It was the trouble at school that she could not isolate them from. As we left the field, and as her girls got into more and more fights at school and felt unsafe there, Danielle was fed up. She wanted to move again.

The relatively small number of parents in the experimental group who moved successfully *and* were able to find out about higher performing schools also typically learned about these schools through word of mouth. One such parent in the Boston experimental group, Michelle, explained the choice to send her daughter to a stronger school, with enrollment by admissions exam, outside of Boston:

Q: How did she end up going there?

A: My girlfriend is a schoolteacher, and her daughter was up at the high school...She told me the schools that she had applied to and she did plenty of research on the schools. So I didn't have to do much research because she already did it all for me.

Q: Could she just sign up for the school, or was there any kind of lottery system for which children got to go there?

A: Yeah, there are. There's a couple of categories. One, you have to be in Boston public school. And they go by your records, your grade records.

Q: Oh, you have to do well in school to get in?

Q: Yes, she's an honor roll student.

Many MTO parents, including many in the experimental group who relocated successfully, had themselves attended predominantly minority, poor, and under-performing schools. Some had dropped out of school, making it hard for them to determine an academically promising school for their children. For instance, in Boston and New York, where students are often given the option of selecting a theme high school, some MTO parents were attracted by the name or theme of a school and used these to determine whether the school was good or appropriate for their children.

Jada's choice in New York and Shenice's in Boston, both of whom successfully relocated to a low poverty neighborhood and managed to remain in them for years, are cases in point. Knowing that his daughter wanted to be a pediatrician, Jada's father supported her choice of the Academy of Health Careers high school. Our ethnographer looked on as father and daughter went through a long list of schools (provided by the New York City school district) and select that school based on the name indicating its focus, unaware—until our fieldworker pointed this out—that the school's graduation rate was just 40 percent. Jada's family had left the inner city for a safe, low poverty neighborhood in Staten Island, where she attended an assigned neighborhood school. Jada was active at school, and her parents were obviously pleased at the education she was receiving. But now faced, for the first time, with a school choice not dictated by their housing location, Jada's parents were struggling with limited information on how to choose.

In Boston, Shenice supported her daughter's choice to attend Boston Tech Academy specifically because it guaranteed students the use of a laptop computer and the choice to keep it, for one dollar, upon graduation. Shenice had applied to the METCO program, but when her daughter was not admitted, Shenice did not push her to apply to a selective exam school in Boston, saying the prospect intimidated her daughter. Shenice liked Boston Tech's focus on computers and considered it a sign of a "good" school. However, like Jada's father, Shenice was unaware that her daughters' school was one of Boston under-performing predominantly minority schools. Mother and daughter were baffled when the school year began and they noticed that few white students attended Boston Tech.

We also found that when parents did get information about schools, they were often confused and did not understand how to make effective use of their choices. Notably, Danielle, whose case we outlined above, had heard about METCO (Metropolitan Council for Educational

Opportunity), a voluntary desegregation program that buses academically promising children from inner-city communities to some of the highest-performing school districts in suburban Boston. And Danielle considered placing her daughter Kia in the program. Yet, in a conversation about schools, Danielle clearly indicated to our ethnographer that she did not quite understand how this special program worked, thinking METCO was a particular school:

“I wanted to sign them up for the METCO school,” said Danielle. I asked her where she heard about METCO, and she said she “just heard it was a good school” ... Danielle explained somewhat confused, “but I have to wait because Kia has to take a test or something, and they give that test only some time, some grade.” (Fieldnote)

On another visit, Danielle’s younger daughter Shauna said to our ethnographer, “I want to go [Boston] Latin Academy,” a high-performing and selective exam school within the district. When we probed, Shauna added that she knew Latin to be “a really good school.” Her mother Danielle, who was listening, had not heard of the school, nor did she question Shauna about it. On another visit, we learned that Danielle was likewise unaware that Shauna’s school had after-school programs—until Shauna mentioned it to our ethnographer in Danielle’s presence.

Safety first

A majority of parents in all three MTO treatment groups, 54.7 percent in the case of the experimental group, cited safety concerns in the old neighborhood (“getting away from drugs, gangs”) as their most important reason for wanting to move (Orr et al. 2003). Likewise, once enrolled in MTO, parents generally emphasized safety first in making choices about their children’s education, and this too is common among low-income urban parents (Bell 2005). Repeatedly, parents, and many of their children as well, said that safety and discipline—and the absence of violence or gang activity, in particular—made a school good or bad. Safety and order—in particular, low disruption in classrooms—are, we should note, important indicators of school quality that directly affect learning. But many MTO parents, in particular those with meaningful school choices to make, seemed to make these the overwhelming priorities, to the exclusion of other factors.

This pattern was especially evident in the Los Angeles school district, which was experiencing a surge of gang-related problems when we conducted our interviews in 2004. Denise, a mother in the Los Angeles experimental group, talked about the differences between the “ghetto” school in her old neighborhood and the school her children attend now:

Q: But you said part of the reason you moved was to get into better schools...How do you think it compares to the other schools...like in [the neighborhood where you used to live in public housing before MTO]?

A: Oh, you can forget about in [the old neighborhood]. Those schools were, I don’t know, just living in the ghetto basically...

Q: So tell me about his current school.

A: It’s a great school...They don’t play around with anything. They have a lot of rules and stuff and that’s what I like about it...They keep an eye on them. Really, they don’t play. There’s school security...They just don’t tolerate a lot of things. So that is what I like about it.

Kimberlyn, also a parent in the LA experimental group, lamented having to move her adolescent son Damian from a better high school in the San Fernando Valley (where MTO placed the family in a low poverty neighborhood) back to the inner-city schools. Kimberlyn complained of some racial harassment in her apartment complex in the Valley, but eventually,

she told us, she decided to move back to an inner-city neighborhood in South LA to be closer to family, friends, and what she perceived to be better access to institutional resources, such as job training. The best she felt she could do for Damian was move him from one inner-city high school (the assigned school) to another, modestly safer one. Kimberlyn accomplished this by giving the school district the address of a friend as her family's (Kimberlyn's and Damian's) new address. Kimberlyn concluded, "Gangs is everywhere." While we visited the family, Damian was at risk of not graduating and was, said Kimberlyn, "not taking school seriously and getting an attitude."

While safety concerns were more prevalent among the families who continued to live in or who moved back to poorer areas, these concerns also shaped the school choices of some families living in the suburbs. When asked how she had chosen the middle school for her children, April, an experimental mother living in a Boston suburb, explained, "My kids told me". Yet, her children, Georgiana and Tevin, disagreed about which school to attend. Tevin wanted to be with friends at the nearest neighborhood school, while Georgiana wanted to attend a school slightly further away because it had more honors classes, better teachers, and was "less ghetto". When asked if she knew anything about either school, April replied, "not really." In the end, April settled the dispute with a safety-first emphasis. Georgiana explained, "My mom said, 'No! Nobody is going to Holmes (Tevin's choice) because there are too many gangs and too many fights.'"

Some MTO parents felt they had to choose between the lesser of two evils. For example, Robin, an African-American mother in the experimental group, moved from her inner-city neighborhood in South LA to an eastern suburb and then to a nearby suburb. After the latest move, Robin, opted not to move her daughter, Terri, out of the local high school despite the fact that Terri had "been jumped" (beaten up) by girls there and was seen "ditching" school (being truant). Among other factors, Terri was struggling to fit in at a school of mostly white and Mexican students. Robin explained,

"Yeah, LA schools are worse than out here. These schools are just now getting bad, but LA schools are way worse. I'd have to walk them to school when I didn't have a car ... [But here] they sent a form home saying that if I wanted her to be switched over to [another high school], that they could transfer her over there, and then, I don't know who she heard it from, but they said that that school is worse than the one she go to. So she decided not to go. I was like, yeah, if you are going to be in more trouble there, might as well stay where you at. Eventually they'll leave you alone, you know. It's not like she's just a bad girl for somebody to pick on..." (Fieldnote)

Trusting that Terri, who was new at her school, was no longer going to hang out with the "bad crowd," Robin decided to keep her daughter there and not risk exposing her to a less familiar, and perhaps worse, environment. But as we outlined above, the decision was based on limited information. Robin also passed on the option of transferring Terri to a school in a nearby city, where Robin considered the schools to be better, because of the difficult commute. In this case, Robin's decision seemed to be a wise one, because based on follow-up visits, Terri soon adapted, made new friends, volunteered at the local library, joined two student organizations, and got a part-time job—all while doing better academically.

In other cases, the priority placed on safety helps explain why some experimental-group parents who stayed in the same school district also kept their children in the same (pre-move) schools after the family moved, i.e. schools serving high poverty neighborhoods anchored by public housing projects. Both parents and children noted that even if the schools in their old neighborhood were dangerous, their risks were well understood and therefore less threatening.

For example, parents pointed to their hard-won knowledge about “gang colors” and which groups of children “caused trouble.” Moving their children to a new school could mean moving them into new gang territory where the “colors” were less well understood and avoided. Some youth were also hesitant to move from schools they knew were unsafe because they had a network of friends they could rely to defend them (“watch their backs”), or because they had established understandings with “troublemakers” who would, in turn, offer needed protection. Adam, a teen in the Section 8 comparison group, left a new school to return to his old neighborhood school. “I want to be somewhere where I am more comfortable,” he told us. “You know, I really don’t know nobody [at the other school], all those other gangsters over there don’t know me.”

Exceptional cases: Seeking out academically promising schools

As we noted above, many MTO parents emphasized safety and order as the overriding indicators of school quality, but many also expressed an interest in engaged and caring teachers and after-school programs or other resources for their children. A minority of MTO parents took extra steps to find schools that were not only safe but academically promising in these other ways. In addition, as researchers have found for other low-income parents who seek to protect and enrich their children in spite of risks in school and in the neighborhood (Furstenberg et al. 1999; Jarrett 1995), some MTO parents also supplemented their “safety first” school choices with special arrangements.

For example, Pamela, a seventy-four year-old mother in the New York control group, successfully enrolled her adopted children Tricia and Eamon in a college preparatory school in the Bronx, where they live, and they participate in after-school programs and special classes. Though the children are only in the sixth grade, Pamela has them thinking about which colleges to attend. Eamon has even flown to Boston to visit Harvard and MIT, and Tricia, at the time our fieldwork ended, was set to visit colleges in California. Pamela obtained a computer for the children to use for school work, and she visits their schools to check on their progress.

Jessica, a mother in the New York experimental group, moved back to an inner-city neighborhood with her son James, but Jessica is a teacher’s aide with a college degree. She carefully researched her son’s school choices and monitors his homework and progress constantly; she also keeps track of enrichment opportunities in and around their neighborhood. Like Pamela, Jessica is more educated than most parents in MTO (or most on housing assistance, nationwide).

But other, less educated MTO parents, also took extra steps to find the right learning opportunities for their children. Monica, a mother in the LA experimental group, enrolled her two sons in a Catholic school. Though the school is in the old neighborhood, a relatively poor enclave of Latino immigrants, Monica works at the school and knows it to be disciplined and safe. The school is operated by the church that the family attends, and the school-church community is a major focus of their social life and volunteering.

Likewise, Laura and her children, in the New York control group, are actively involved in the charter school they attend in their inner-city community. Laura is a high school dropout and was a mother as a young teen. Her children participate in after-school programs at their charter school, and two of Laura’s older sons work at the school. During our fieldwork, one was pursuing his GED (high school equivalency) because it was a work requirement of the school. A few other MTO parents in our sample sought enriching schools far beyond their neighborhoods: A mother in LA, for example, provided her employer’s address as her own in order to get her children into the schools in that affluent community.

Finally, some schools, though chosen for safety reasons, turned out to be academically enriching. As we noted above, Robin's daughter Terri adapted successfully to her high school in an eastern suburb of Los Angeles, though Terri was in the minority as a black student there and got "jumped" early on by trouble-making students—and though she had struggled with the family's repeat moving. Along with extra-curricular involvement, a part-time job, and stronger grades, Terri had developed what experts describe as essential to the learning process: productive relationships with her teachers. As Terri told us, "You could put me in a class right now, and I could be the only black student, with that teacher, I wouldn't care. Cuz I know that teacher, and I know so much about that teacher, and I feel comfortable with that teacher teaching me."

Parents' other concerns

Other factors aside, MTO parents, like parents everywhere, favored schools for their children that were near the home or otherwise conveniently located. In prior studies, low-income parents are especially likely to report convenient location as a priority.⁹ Wanda, a mother in the L.A. experimental group stated unequivocally, "I like the school for one reason: It's close." Other parents, such as Laura in New York, explained that she liked having her children in a school nearby because she could get to them quickly if "anything were to happen." Like some other MTO parents, Laura did not have access to a car.

Even among the parents with cars, driving children to a distant or inconveniently situated school, for example in another city or far from major roads or highways, proved to be discouraging, particularly when it conflicted with parent's work schedule or training. Robin, whose daughter had been jumped in the local neighborhood school, explained why she decided against sending her daughter to better schools in the adjacent city:

"Well sending her to school in Riverside, that would be kind of far...I don't know how I would get her (there)... I'd drive her to school, but that would be too much trying to get her way over there, then with traffic, and then coming home too, that just be too much. Now if she was driving, well she got a car already, if she had her license, she could drive her own self there, you know." (Fieldnote)

There were other factors shaping school choices in ways that may have compromised academic quality, including administrative concerns, child care needs, and efforts to make school and school-based friendships a source of stability for children amidst the disruption of moving. First, quite a few experimental-group and comparison-group parents who kept their children in inner-city schools cited concerns about credit transfer and grade promotion, again reflecting their lack of information. As Tiffany, an adolescent in the L.A. experimental group described her hesitation with changing schools, "I heard they didn't give credits."

Childcare needs (and the location of caregivers) were another major reason parents kept children in schools in their old neighborhoods. Many parents had arrangements with relatives or friends who lived in the former neighborhood, trusted people to pick up their children or watch them after school. So these parents, especially if they had jobs, were more likely to keep their children in the old schools. Dana, a mother in the L.A. experimental group, detailed her decision to have her children sleep over at a relative's home in the old neighborhood to accommodate her work schedule:

¹⁰ For example, in the carefully evaluated Alum Rock school voucher demonstration, 70 percent of low-income parents cited "location" as the primary reason for choosing their children's schools (Maddaus 1990).

A: ...she left elementary and she graduated fifth grade from over in [public housing development], because I was still working, so that was my only child care. And grandmamma, she would send them to school [then] I brought them home.

Q: But so she went up through fifth grade at the same school over by [the development]? And even when you had moved out to [your new neighborhood]?

A: I kept her there [old neighborhood] because, by me driving the school bus, I would have to be at work at 4:30 in the morning...And it was kind of hard for me to get them up and drive. So what I'd do is I'd leave them there [at grandmother's] during the week, and then on the weekends I'd bring them home.

A minority of those mover parents who did not change their children's schools did so because they wanted to preserve their children's friendships and not force their children to find new friends or peers in new schools. Both parents and children mentioned that friendships were important for safety, but also for academic and social development. Parents felt that moving had disrupted other aspects of their children's lives, and so some parents wanted to keep school life and friendships more stable. Not having good information with which to compare schools and their standards across different neighborhoods, some parents likewise interpreted "good grades" at the old school as a sign of good fit for their children. Renee, an experimental group mother, explained:

I didn't want them to transfer school, 'cause it's much harder, I thought, for teenagers to make friends. And they were doing such a good job at the school they were at. Their grades were doing good, they were active in all the cheerleading. I just felt it would mess them up if they left that school and had to start over 'cause I just felt it's harder when you're in high school to make friends.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, those families who changed schools *repeatedly* reported problems with social disruption and negative effects on children's academic achievement. This was especially evident in experimental families who moved multiple times after enrollment in MTO. Terri, an adolescent in the Los Angeles experimental group who we introduced above, explained her frustration with moving:

[As] soon as I get just started knowing people and really having relationships and friends and that takes a long time for me to do, we'll move. So I have to start all over again, all over again.

Likewise, Shana, a teen in the same L.A. group, reported that she had been held back because of frequent school changes:

I'm in fifth [grade]. I was supposed to be in seventh, but when I moved, the Section 8 people were supposed to push me back up in the seventh grade. But the school wouldn't let them, so I couldn't go into the seventh grade.

Summary and discussion

Despite the fact that most MTO experimental-group children did not leave the school district when they moved, and that some remained in predominantly poor and minority schools comparable to those attended by control-group youth, relocating clearly enabled many families to distance their children from key risks that plague inner city schools. Most of the experimental-group parents and children we interviewed perceived the schools in their low poverty neighborhoods (whether or not they were still in those places) as much better than their "old" schools. While the primary advantage cited by parents was greater safety, some parents also cited more engaged teachers, a more racially diverse student body, and multiple after-school activities. But overall, MTO produced limited improvements in school context, certainly

much more limited than the Gautreaux housing desegregation that inspired the demonstration. Changes over the course of the MTO experiment make it challenging to interpret the program's effects so far. But as for why relocation did not do more to improve school quality, we found:

- ***Moving back to poorer neighborhoods:*** Some families in the MTO experimental group—typically citing rising rents and utility costs, problems with the housing unit or landlord, or the need to be closer to specific resources—moved back to the inner city and back to its generally poorer school choices. And many families, once there, were unable to make the most of the school choices, if any, available to them. In Boston and New York, for example, parents have many choices beyond the “assigned” neighborhood school, especially at the high school level, but as outlined below, MTO parents were typically ill-equipped to make those choices.
- ***Information poverty—a weak context for school choice.*** Wider options do not mean much if one cannot exercise them effectively. Most MTO parents, like many low-income families nationwide, draw on very limited information resources, such as word-of-mouth referrals from ill-informed relatives or friends. The families lacked institutional guidance, better placed contacts, or other supports. More specifically, parents lacked the information required to determine which schools were of genuinely high academic quality. Most MTO parents did not focus on tangible academic supports or indicators of student achievement but on safety and order. These are no doubt threshold conditions for learning. But lacking education themselves and lacking appropriate guidance, most MTO parents asked little more of the schools than safety and order, as explained below. Some MTO children were much better informed than their parents. The parents' information poverty is the most striking and consistent pattern across sites and types of families, regardless of differences in specific school priorities or housing choices.
- ***Safety first (and last?).*** Many MTO families, like other less educated and low income parents (Bell 2005), made choices that belie expert views about how parents *should* choose schools and, more to the point, about what parents should value most. All but a few MTO movers emphasized safety as the key mark of a “good” school. Ironically, some parents kept their children in the same schools (post-move), not just the same school districts, because they knew the danger zones in those schools and because children had friends to “back them up” or security-enhancing “arrangements” with troublemaking youth. These parents and youth preferred to avoid new dangers in unfamiliar schools and unknown social terrain. Many MTO families seemed to discount the advantages that might be obtained from changing schools in order to minimize the associated risks.
- ***Convenience, familiarity, and stability.*** The need to juggle caregiving, work, and other demands encouraged some parents to enroll their children in the schools that were closest to the home or most conveniently located to their sources of social support. Mindful of the disruptions associated with moving, and not wanting to destroy their children's friendships in the old school, some parents chose not to leave them there, in spite of moving and having wider school options.

Policy recommendations

Help families stay in, not just get to, better neighborhoods. The threshold conditions for academic success not only include safety, order, quality instruction, student and parental effort, and meaningful academic supports but *stability* as well—being part of a school community long enough to understand one's choices, form productive relationships with teachers and staff and other students, and adapt to a new environment. The repeat moving reported by many members of the MTO experimental group (who received special counseling and search

assistance for their *first* move in MTO) and the Section 8 comparison group (those who moved in the framework of the standard voucher program, unassisted, from the start) directly undermined these processes. Many of the moves we learned about or directly observed reflect what the Census Bureau defines as “involuntary” moving, triggered by unaffordable housing costs, life shocks, and other challenges (Fischer 2002). These were not direct school achievement factors in MTO, of course, but they helped delimit, in a powerful way, the housing and school choices available to MTO families. Policies to expand the supply of rental housing that is affordable, and remains affordable, for low and moderate income families are crucial if assisted housing mobility programs are to succeed, especially in high-cost or “tight” housing markets such as greater Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. Flexibility in rent ceilings and housing voucher payment standards can help, too. And when families must relocate, counseling beyond the first move (opportunity-focused counseling for *any* move) has shown promise as a tool for encouraging better locational outcomes over the long run.

“Rent subsidies just lower the rent:” Inform and expand school choices directly. Housing vouchers and mobility counseling could be directly tied to school choice programs that include institutional supports for less informed, and typically more constrained, parents. Social policy programs may never be perfectly integrated or seamlessly managed to focus on particular clients. But basic supports could address the serious *information poverty* of families on housing assistance, encouraging parents who have real choices to consider (a) a wider choice set and (b) more reliable measures of schools’ academic potential for their children. We do not have in mind counselors “selling” particular schools to families. But a case management approach to pre and post-move counseling could ensure that families who participate in housing mobility programs understand the school options for their children, when considering new neighborhoods, and ensure that after moving, the families meet school staff who can help. Community institutions can also help compensate for the insular and mostly ill-informed networks of relatives and friends that low-income minority parents typically rely on to make big choices. Innovative, emerging efforts at “responsible relocation,” triggered by major planned redevelopment of East Baltimore, show real promise for mobilizing such institutional supports—a sustained and less crisis-oriented variant of the mobilization of faith and community institutions mobilized to aid those displaced by Hurricane Katrina (Briggs 2006).

Address families’ concerns about safety, social supports, the disruptions of moving, and tough trade-offs. It is important for policy makers and program staff to understand the competing concerns for safety, academic and social disruption, convenience, and childcare arrangements that low-income families typically consider when making school choices for their children. Here again, well-designed and well-managed counseling can address the complexity of these choices and the trade-offs entailed. Since some of the trade-offs are about physical access, moreover, transportation solutions—such as “car vouchers” tied to housing ones—would strengthen housing and school opportunity programs for many low-income families.

Research priorities. We plan to examine a number of issues beyond the scope of this paper in our future work, including MTO children’s educational effort, achievement, and outlook. Some MTO sites show modest achievement gains by the experimental group, and there is some evidence that girls in the experimental group are getting better grades than boys in that group—part of a larger pattern of results that favor girl movers and show real problems for boys who relocate, particularly in the domain of risky behavior (Orr et al. 2003). Also, adolescents and young adults in MTO are making choices about college and career that we want to examine for effects of relocation and neighborhood context. Finally, we believe that there are pressing questions, suggested by our results, that other researchers and policy experts should address, such as the prospects for integrated choice counseling. For example, what are the keys to designing and delivering effective counseling that maximizes families’ choices in the linked

domains of housing, schooling, and health and human services? And what non-counseling rules and incentives are most important?

References

- Basolo, Victoria and Mai Thi Nguyen. 2006. Does Neighborhood Matter?: The Neighborhood Conditions of Housing Voucher Holders by Race and Ethnicity. *Housing Policy Debate* 16(3/4):297-324.
- Bell, Courtney. 2005. All Choices Created Equal? How Good Parents Select "Failing" Schools. Working Paper, National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education. New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University (October).
- Bipartisan Millennial Housing Commission Appointed by the Congress of the United States. 2002. *Meeting Our Nation's Housing Challenges*. U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Brooks-Gunn, Jeanne, Greg J. Duncan and J. Lawrence Aber. 1997, eds. *Neighborhood Poverty: Context and Consequences for Children*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Briggs, Xavier de Souza. 1997 "Moving Up Versus Moving Out: Neighborhood Effects in Housing Mobility Programs." *Housing Policy Debate* 8(1):195-234.
- _____. 2004. "Traps and stepping stones: Neighborhood dynamics and family well-being." Working paper RWP04-015, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- _____. 2005. "More *Pluribus*, Less *Unum*?: The Changing Geography of Race and Opportunity in America," In *The Geography of Opportunity: Race and Housing Choice in Metropolitan America*, edited by Xavier de Souza Briggs. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- _____. 2006. After Katrina: Rebuilding Places and Lives. *City & Community* 5(2):119-128.
- Bulman, Robert. 2004. School-Choice Stories: The Role of Culture. *Sociological Inquiry* 74 (4):492-519.
- Burton, Linda. 1997. "Ethnography and the Meaning of Adolescence in High-Risk Neighborhoods." *Ethos* 25(2): 208-217.
- Carter, Prudence. 2003. "Black" Cultural Capital, Status Positioning and Schooling Conflicts for Low-Income African American Youth". *Social Problems* 50 (1):136-155.
- Clampet-Lundquist, Susan , Kathryn Edin, Jeffrey R. Kling, and Greg J. Duncan. 2006. "Moving At-Risk Teenagers Out Of High-Risk Neighborhoods: Why Girls Fare Better Than Boys." Working Paper #509 Industrial Relations Section. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Cunningham, Mary K. and Audrey Drosch. 2005. "Neighborhood Quality and Racial Segregation." Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.
- Ellen, Ingrid Gould and Margery Austin Turner. 2003. "Do Neighborhoods Matter and Why," In *Choosing a Better Life?: Evaluating the Moving to Opportunity Social Experiment*, edited by John Goering and Judith Feins. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.
- Fischer, Claude S. 2002. "Ever-More Rooted Americans." *City & Community* 1(2):175-193.

- Furstenberg, Frank F., Jr., Thomas D. Cook, Jacquelynne Eccles, Glen H. Elder, Jr., and Arnold Sameroff. 1999. *Managing to Make It: Urban Families and Adolescent Success*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Galster, George C. and Sean P. Killen. 1995. "The Geography of Metropolitan Opportunity: A Reconnaissance and Conceptual Framework." *Housing Policy Debate* 6(1):7-43.
- Goetz, Edward. 2004. *Clearing the Way: Deconcentrating the Poor in Urban America*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.
- Goering, John, Ali Kamely, and Todd Richardson. 1994. *The Location and Racial Composition of Public Housing in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- Harkness, Joseph And Sandra J. Newman. 2005. "Housing Affordability And Children's Well-Being: Evidence From The National Survey Of America's Families." *Housing Policy Debate* 16 (2):223-256.
- Kaufman, J., and J. Rosenbaum. 1992. The education and employment of low-income black youth in white suburbs. *Educational Evaluation & Policy Analysis* 14(3): 229-40.
- Khadduri, Jill. 2006. "Comment on Victoria Basolo and Mai Thi Ngyuen's 'Does Neighborhood Matter?'" *Housing Policy Debate* 16(3/4):325-334.
- Jarrett, Robin. 1995. "Growing Up Poor: The Family Experience of Socially Mobile Youth in Low-Income African-American Neighborhoods." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 10(1): 111-135.
- Jencks, Christopher. 1970. *Education Vouchers: A Report on Financing Education By Payments to Parents*. Cambridge, MA: Center for the Study of Public Policy.
- Leventhal, Tama and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. 2000. "The Neighborhoods They Live In: The Effects of Neighborhood Residence on Child and Adolescent Outcomes." *Psychological Bulletin* 126(2):309-337.
- Maddaus, John. 1990. "Parental Choice of School: What Parents Think and Do". *Review of Research in Education* 16:267-295.
- Newman, Sandra J. and Ann B. Schnare. 1997. "... And a suitable living environment": The failure of housing programs to deliver on neighborhood quality." *Housing Policy Debate* 8(4):703-741.
- Orr, Larry, Judith D. Feins, Robin Jacob, Erik Beecroft, Lisa Sanbonmatsu, Lawrence F. Katz, Jeffrey B. Liebman, and Jeffrey R. Kling. 2003. *Moving to Opportunity: Interim Impacts Evaluation*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- Pashup, Jennifer, Kathryn Edin, Greg J. Duncan, and Karen Burke. 2006. "Participation in a Residential Mobility Program from the Client's Perspective: Findings from Gautreaux Two." *Housing Policy Debate* 16(3/4):361-392.
- Pendall, Rolf. 2000. Why Voucher and Certificate Holders Live in Distressed Neighborhoods. *Housing Policy Debate* 11(4):881-910.
- Popkin, Susan J. and Mary K. Cunningham. 1999. *CHAC Section 8 Program: Barriers to Successful Leasing Up*. Final Report. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Popkin, Susan J., Larry F. Buron, Diane K. Levy, and Mary K. Cunningham. 2000. "The Gautreaux Legacy: What Might Mixed-Income and Dispersal Strategies Mean for the Poorest Public Housing Tenants?" *Housing Policy Debate* 11(4): 911-942.

- Popkin, Susan J., Laura E. Harris and Mary K. Cunningham. 2001. *Families in Transition: A qualitative analysis of the MTO experience*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- Popkin, Susan J., Michael Eiseman, and Elizabeth Cove. 2004. "How are HOPE VI Families Faring? Children." Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.
- Rosenbaum, James. 1995. "Changing the geography of opportunity by expanding housing choice: Lessons from the Gautreaux program." *Housing Policy Debate* 6(1):231-269.
- Rubinowitz, L., and J. Rosenbaum. 2000. *Crossing the Class and Color Lines: From Public Housing to White Suburbia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sanbonmatsu, Lisa, Jeffrey R. Kling, Greg J. Duncan, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. 2004. Neighborhoods And Academic Achievement: Results From The Moving To Opportunity Experiment. Working Paper # 492. Industrial Relations Section Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Shroder, Mark. 2002. Locational Constraint, Housing Counseling, and Successful Lease-Up in a Randomized Housing Voucher Experiment. *Journal of Urban Economics* 51(2):315-338.
- Skiba, Russel J., Robert S. Michael, Abra Carroll Nardo, and Reece Paterson. 2000. "The Color of Discipline: Sources of Racial and Gender Disproportionality in School Punishment." *Policy Research Report #SRS1*. Indiana Education Policy Center.
- Weisner, Thomas. 1996. "Why Ethnography Should Be the Most Important Method in the Study of Human Development," pp.305-324 in *Ethnography and Human Development: Context and Meaning in Social Inquiry*, edited by Richard Jessor, Anne Colby, and Richard Shweder. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Wilson, William Julius. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago.