

“We Don’t Live Outside, We Live in Here”: Neighborhood and Residential Mobility Decisions Among Low-Income Families[†]

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Over 20 years of scholarship suggests that living in America’s poorest and most dangerous communities diminishes the life course development of children and adults. In the 1990s, the dire conditions of some of these neighborhoods, especially those with large public housing developments, prompted significant policy responses. In addition to the demolition and redevelopment of some of the projects, the federal government launched an experiment to help families leave poor neighborhoods through an assisted housing voucher program called Moving to Opportunity (MTO). While families who moved through this program initially relocated to census tracts with poverty rates almost four times lower than their original projects, many returned to communities of moderate to high poverty. Why? We use mixed methods to explore the patterns and the decision-making processes behind moves among MTO families. Focusing on the Baltimore MTO site, we find that traditional theories for residential choice did not fully explain these outcomes. While limited access to public transportation, housing quality problems, and landlords made it hard for families to move to, or stay in, low-poverty neighborhoods, there were also more striking explanations for their residential trajectories. Many families valued the low-poverty neighborhoods they were originally able to access with their vouchers, but when faced with the need to move again, they often sacrificed neighborhood quality for dwelling quality in order to accommodate changing family needs. Having lived in high-poverty neighborhoods most of their lives, they developed a number of coping strategies and beliefs that made them confident they could handle such a consequential trade-off and protect themselves and their children from the dangers of poorer areas.

INTRODUCTION

Cutting edge research in sociology leaves increasingly little doubt that life in our nation’s poorest and most violent communities diminishes children’s educational potential and

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the long-term life chances of their parents (Sampson, Sharkey and Raudenbush 2008; Sharkey 2010; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002). Redeveloping such neighborhoods to provide a better playing field for urban families has been one policy tactic, although, some activists and policy makers have opted for a more radical approach to address urban inequalities: help poor families escape the ghetto and move to middle class communities. Such “assisted mobility” programs have leveraged housing choice vouchers to allow families to move to higher opportunity neighborhoods across a number of metropolitan areas over the last few decades.¹ Chicago’s Gautreaux mobility program and the federal Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment are two of the most widely studied of these programs.² The Gautreaux program was the result of a civil rights desegregation lawsuit; the legal remedy employed Section-8 vouchers and housing counseling assistance to move families from public housing projects in poor, highly segregated neighborhoods to less poor, nonsegregated suburbs, and city neighborhoods deemed to be integrating.³ Research on families who participated in Gautreaux showed some striking results: over 15 years later, most of the families who moved to low poverty, mostly white neighborhoods were still in similar communities (Keels et al. 2005; DeLuca et al. 2010).

Buoyed by these positive findings from Gautreaux, the federally funded MTO experiment was implemented with a rigorous research design and on a larger scale in five cities. MTO offered low-income families with children living in public or assisted housing in high-poverty neighborhoods the chance to move to low-poverty neighborhoods.⁴ The MTO program randomly assigned participant families to one of three treatment groups: an “experimental” group who received relocation counseling and a housing voucher that had to be used in a low-poverty neighborhood; a “Section-8” group who received a market-based housing voucher to be used in any neighborhood where it would be accepted; and a “control” group who received no assistance but was not constrained to stay in their original neighborhood. Unlike Gautreaux, which used a race-based criterion to determine the neighborhoods (e.g., census tracts) to which families could go, the MTO program used the poverty rate of the neighborhood to establish which areas were permissible destinations for experimental group movers. Evaluations of the MTO program find that the long-term neighborhood outcomes have been mixed—most experimental families who had originally followed program guidelines and moved to low-poverty neighborhoods were no longer living in such neighborhoods a decade later (although they were still in lower-poverty areas on average than the control group that did not receive vouchers) (Orr et al. 2003; Sanbonmatsu et al. 2011).⁵

In theory, residential mobility programs like MTO provide families with vouchers and counseling that can help them overcome some of the financial and structural barriers that impede moves to higher opportunity neighborhoods. Indeed, MTO did just that, and many families enjoyed the low-poverty neighborhoods they had access to because of the program. Yet we find that over time, the majority of families relocated to higher poverty neighborhoods. Why? Within this puzzle is the opportunity to explore a process that has gone largely unanswered in the sociological literature to date—why do people move where they do? In the aftermath of the MTO results, scholars have hotly debated whether voucher programs, which rely on the private market, can overcome the preferences of individual families and the metro-wide residential sorting patterns that serve to reinforce segregation and concentrated poverty (Clampet-Lundquist and Massey 2008; Imbroscio 2012; Sampson 2008; Clark 2008). However, these debates have not been able to tell us how individual preferences work, where they come from,

and how they intersect with structural barriers to reproduce patterns of residential inequality.

In this paper, we use quantitative and qualitative data from the MTO experiment in Baltimore to explore *why MTO families moved where they did after random assignment and in the years that followed*. Using survey and census data, GIS mapping, and interviews with MTO participants, we take a closer look at the processes behind neighborhood and housing choice to understand *why more families didn't move to, and stay in, the kinds of low poverty, "high opportunity" neighborhoods the program required*. We confirm that structural barriers and other features of the housing market, such as landlords and housing quality problems, are a regular source of residential instability and prompted families to leave their first unit with MTO. However, we also show that considerable affordability constraints and changing family structures also forced the MTO families to make trade-offs between neighborhood and unit quality, often landing them back in higher poverty, segregated communities. Unlike previous work, we also uncover how families adapted to these constraints, and the worldviews and logic that governed their subsequent moves back into high-poverty neighborhoods. We find that families' confidence in their strategies to stay safe in poor, violent neighborhoods allowed them to make the consequential trade-offs between neighborhood safety and unit quality. It was these skills, honed over years of surviving in dangerous places, rather than discomfort in low-poverty communities, preferences for same-race neighbors, or desire to be close to kin, which seemed to be more important for shaping where families moved after their initial MTO unit. When combined with the difficulties of obtaining affordable housing in low-poverty areas, these skills and worldviews explain how families adjusted their expectations about what constituted suitable neighborhoods and drew them back into poorer neighborhoods over time.

BACKGROUND

William Julius Wilson's (1987) classic work on the deleterious effects of social isolation among the black urban poor motivated hundreds of studies on neighborhood effects, which emphasized the significance of community level processes for poor families and children (Jencks and Meyer 1990; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997; Duncan 1994). This ever expanding body of research documents that exposure to poor neighborhoods can diminish economic outcomes and social development, beyond the effects of individual and family background (Ellen and Turner 1997; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan and Aber 1997; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002). Nowhere was such social isolation and neighborhood disadvantage more notable than in the sprawling public housing complexes that were home to thousands of families in large urban areas (Venkatesh 2000; Popkin 1995).

By the late 1980s, many people associated public housing projects with violence, social disorder, and crumbling urban infrastructure. In 1989, Congress created the National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing to identify the prevalence of physical and social disorder in public housing and to propose a plan for addressing it. The commission found that a portion of the country's public housing stock was "severely distressed"—plagued by physical deterioration, high levels of neighborhood poverty and crime, and with residents in need of social support services (United States 1992). In

response, Congress and HUD initiated the Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) program, which funded public housing authorities to demolish distressed housing projects in cities nationwide.

In the background to HOPE VI, and in sharp contrast to its place-based urban redevelopment focus, the Gautreaux desegregation remedy had already been helping public housing families leave housing projects and move to middle class suburban areas for over a decade (Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum 2000).⁶ Although participation in the program was voluntary, families did not choose where to move; housing counselors worked with landlords and real estate agents to secure housing in the city and suburban areas, and assigned families to units in new neighborhoods. Gautreaux succeeded remarkably in moving low-income black families into more racially integrated and more affluent neighborhoods (DeLuca and Rosenbaum 2003). Families' original communities averaged poverty rates close to 40 percent, and the program placed families in areas that on average had only 17 percent poor residents; most families were still in low-poverty communities 15–20 years later (Keels et al. 2005).

The Gautreaux program's success in moving families out of segregated and poor communities suggested that Section-8 vouchers, alongside housing counseling and landlord assistance, could be used as an alternative strategy to help families escape ghetto poverty. However, Gautreaux was not designed as a research experiment, and the lack of a true control group meant that these results were still subject to selection bias—that is, perhaps those who were most advantaged to start with were those most likely to move to the suburbs, while those who were least advantaged might have been less likely to move outside of the city.⁷ Motivated by the promising Gautreaux results, the MTO demonstration incorporated an experimental design to test whether vouchers and housing counseling could alleviate poverty concentration.

The MTO demonstration represented an improvement over the comparison afforded by Gautreaux by employing random assignment to place families who volunteered to participate into one of the three treatment groups (the “experimental” group, the “Section-8” group who received a voucher with no geographical restrictions, and a control group who did not receive a voucher or housing counseling). Beginning in 1994, MTO offered volunteer families in public housing projects in high-poverty neighborhoods in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles the chance to participate in the program. In the case of the experimental group, the voucher could only be used in a neighborhood that was less than 10 percent poor. Unlike Gautreaux, there were no restrictions on the racial composition of the neighborhoods they could lease up in and, also unlike Gautreaux, MTO families chose their own units. Housing counseling, some landlord outreach, and modest transportation and search assistance was provided for the families by nonprofit agencies in all of the cities (Feins, McInnis and Popkin 1997). Once families moved with MTO, they did not receive additional counseling for subsequent relocations.

Both survey and qualitative evidence document that MTO participants saw the program as a chance to move their families to safer environments and families were largely successful in achieving this outcome (Orr et al. 2003; Ludwig et al. 2008; Popkin, Harris, and Cunningham 2002). Given the literature on the negative impacts of growing up in high-poverty communities, and the growing policy emphasis on poverty deconcentration, it was widely hoped that the program would also “set the stage for exposure to the influences of an environment that might improve life chances” (Orr et al. 2003, p. 21).

Yet in the years that followed, many experimental families who had used their voucher to move to a low-poverty neighborhood were no longer living in such neighborhoods. In part, this was driven by the fact that more than 40 percent of the experimental movers went to neighborhoods where the poverty level had been increasing during the 1990s.⁸ Thus, some who stayed in place saw their neighborhoods become increasingly poorer. However, for most families, subsequent mobility led them into neighborhoods that were often markedly poorer than their first MTO addresses. At evaluations carried out four to seven years and 10–15 years after random assignment, experimental group families were still living in neighborhoods that were significantly less poor and safer than those of controls—and those of families receiving an unrestricted Section-8 voucher (Orr et al. 2003; Sanbonmatsu et al. 2011). Yet on average, the poverty rates of these neighborhoods were well above the 10 percent low-poverty threshold, and they were racially segregated. In this paper, we explore why some of the MTO families never made it to the more affluent neighborhoods required by the program, and why most families who did manage to access low-poverty communities ended up leaving them in the years that followed.

CONCEPTUALIZING RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY

Studies of family residential mobility date back to Rossi's (1955) study of moving among families in Philadelphia. His groundbreaking research debunked earlier beliefs that mobility was a sign of "normlessness" and the breakdown of civic ties by showing that it was instead a natural part of the life cycle, as families "adjusted" their housing to fit their changing needs for space and neighborhood amenities (cf. Speare 1974). Subsequent sociological research found that mobility is also determined by a number of socioeconomic and demographic factors, such as career trajectories, marital status, age, education, race, and homeownership (Speare, Goldscheider, and Frey 1975; South and Crowder 1997). Economic research in this vein has conceptualized residential mobility as the result of cost–benefit calculations, through which people consider the costs and rewards of moving and search for homes that meet their preferences for housing quality and neighborhood characteristics (Tiebout 1956; Quigley 1979; Cadwallader 1992; Shlay 1985).

However, most studies only tell us why families moved, not why they moved where they did (Rossi and Shlay 1982). Part of the story is certainly about where families cannot move. Historically, poor African American families, who were the majority of participants in MTO in Baltimore, have faced housing market barriers—a long tradition of research on place stratification and discrimination in housing markets documents this well (Logan 1978; South and Crowder 1997; Yinger 1995).⁹ The Department of Housing and Urban Development has sponsored audit studies in more than 20 metropolitan areas across the country, and even by 2000, white testers were still treated more favorably than African Americans in one out of every five tests and African Americans were significantly less likely than whites to be given information about available rental units, and had fewer opportunities to inspect units (Turner et al. 2002; Ross and Turner 2005).

Research has suggested that another part of the story about where people live is driven by racial preferences. Some scholars argue that black families move where they do because they prefer to live near same-race neighbors and kin (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997; Clark 1991, 1992). Others find that blacks actually prefer more integrated communities, but white avoidance of black neighborhoods plays a larger role in explaining

residential patterns than does same race affinity (Charles 2006; Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996). However, virtually none of this work examines which preferences or worldviews actually drive the housing choices of low-income minority families who are in the process of moving, and the trade-offs they make when they have to reconcile their preferences with structural constraints (cf., Briggs, Comey, and Weismann 2010 for a discussion of trade-offs). In this paper, we take advantage of the puzzle presented by the neighborhood outcomes in MTO to explore in greater detail the larger sociological question of why low-income families move where they do.

DATA AND METHODS

Our analysis proceeds in three steps. First, we use survey data from the Interim Impacts Evaluation of MTO and data from the 2000 census to chart the mobility patterns among MTO families in Baltimore between 1994 and 2002. We focus specifically on changes in neighborhood attainment over time, and compare “experimental mover” families who used their voucher to move to low-poverty neighborhoods to “Section-8” group families who used a voucher wherever they could find a landlord willing to accept it, and control families who were not offered a voucher.¹⁰ We compare the residential locations of families in these three groups at three times: in the “origin” neighborhoods where families were living when they signed up for the program between 1994 and 1998; in the “first move” neighborhoods where experimental and Section-8 movers went when they used their MTO housing voucher (and where controls went when they moved for the first time after random assignment¹¹); and in the most recent known location for both groups from the MTO interim evaluation carried out in 2002. We also use ArcGIS to map the locations of families in the Baltimore region, and to measure the degree of clustering among them. We do not perform an experimental impacts analysis of the effect of the offer of a voucher on subsequent residential locations of MTO participants, as this has been done elsewhere (Orr et al. 2003; Sanbonmatsu et al. 2011).

Our second step takes a closer look at the geography of the Baltimore metropolitan region in order to understand the context and constraints under which families were using their vouchers. For this analysis, we focus on the families in the experimental group who successfully “leased up” with their vouchers (“experimental movers,” hereafter). Using census and transportation data, we undertake a choice-set analysis which compares all of the census tracts in which experimental mover families could have potentially used their vouchers to those in which they actually leased-up. This gives us an idea of the kinds of constraints under which families were operating, as well as the options they had as they moved with their housing vouchers.

Our third step uses interviews conducted with MTO participants in Baltimore. In this analysis, we focus on the two groups for which we found the greatest difference in neighborhood attainment: the experimental movers and control group families who were never offered a voucher through MTO. We conducted these interviews in 2003 and 2004, following the Interim Impacts Evaluation Survey, which was done in 2002. In Baltimore, a stratified random subsample of 124 heads of household from all three treatment groups (experimental, Section-8, and control) were interviewed for the study.¹² Household heads were female and African American, and many had low incomes at the time of the interim survey (appendix Table A1 includes a descriptive profile of the families).

Interviews lasted between three and five hours, and covered a range of topics including family history, neighborhoods, employment, and children's schools.

From this sample, we focused on all of the interviews conducted with heads of households in the experimental mover group. This group ($N = 33$) was chosen because their participation in the program meant that they had recently moved, and because their moves to low-poverty neighborhoods were the main focus of MTO. We also looked at all of the interviews with household heads in the experimental group who did *not* move with the low-poverty voucher ($N = 10$), and a random sample of 10 controls.¹³ This sample was chosen to maximize heterogeneity in residential decision making of low-income families.¹⁴ Fifty-three interviews were used in this study.

Interview transcripts were coded using MAXQDA. We coded for both preexisting constructs relevant to prior research ("push" and "pull" factors around mobility, including family or neighborhood issues; "barriers", such as landlords or financial concerns; "housing search" methods and information) and constructs that emerged inductively in the coding process. The latter (coding for emergent constructs) is a hallmark of qualitative analysis, ensuring that relevant factors that might not have been evident at the outset can be taken into account in the analysis.

FINDINGS

Mobility Patterns

Table 1 shows the neighborhood changes experienced by Baltimore experimental mover, Section-8, and control families. The "Origin Neighborhood" columns show that families in all three groups were living in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the city when they signed up for the program—between one third and 40 percent were in neighborhoods that were more than 50 percent poor. The lower section of the table shows neighborhood racial composition. Prior to starting the program, 70 percent of the families were in hypersegregated neighborhoods that were more than 90 percent black.

The columns to the right describe how neighborhoods changed as participants in each group moved out of their origin neighborhoods, first after random assignment ("First Move Neighborhood") and as of the interim survey, in 2002 ("Most Recent Neighborhood"). After their first move, all three groups experienced reductions in poverty, although experimental families saw the greatest reduction in neighborhood poverty, from 45 percent to only 11 percent on average. The distributions of poverty rate show how much the destination neighborhoods of experimental group families differed from the other two groups: almost all experimental movers went to neighborhoods that were less than 20 percent poor, while only about a quarter of Section-8 and control families ended up in these kinds of neighborhoods. With the voucher and counseling assistance, experimental movers also relocated to less segregated neighborhoods than controls and Section-8 users, although 40 percent were living in neighborhoods that had more than 70 percent African American residents, which is slightly more than the city-wide average for Baltimore (65 percent as of the 2000 census). The table underscores the striking differences between families who used an experimental voucher and those who were given a conventional Section-8 voucher. While most experimental families initially moved to low- or moderate-poverty neighborhoods and only about 16 percent moved to hypersegregated communities (more than 90 percent black), more than half of the

TABLE 1. Comparison of Experimental Mover, Section-8 Mover, and Control Neighborhoods, Change Over Time

2000 Census Data	Origin Neighborhood			First Move Neighborhood			Most Recent Neighborhood		
	Experimental Movers	Section-8 Mover	Controls	Experimental Movers	Section-8 Mover	Controls	Experimental Movers	Section-8 Mover	Controls
Neighborhood poverty rate	45.00%	43.50%	46.00%	11.30%	29.2%*	33.4%*	21.00%	28.2%*	35.5%*
Mean NH poverty rate	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	42.10%	6.80%	7.60%	25.00%	9.30%	4.10%
Distributions of NH poverty	0.70%	0.80%	0.50%	56.60%	17.30%	16.40%	34.70%	19.50%	21.80%
Less than 10% poor	22.60%	26.10%	19.00%	0.70%	24.80%	19.30%	15.30%	27.10%	15.90%
10–20% poor	37.00%	40.30%	37.40%	0.70%	49.60%	39.80%	21.00%	37.30%	30.00%
20–30% poor	39.70%	32.80%	43.10%	0.00%	1.50%	17.00%	4.00%	6.80%	28.20%
30–50% poor									
More than 50% poor									
Neighborhood Racial Composition									
Mean NH percent black	77.00%	73.80%	78.40%	57.50%	76.3%*	81.5%*	71.30%	76.00%	83.9%*
Distributions of NH percent black									
Less than 20% black	21.90%	26.90%	19.50%	7.60%	4.50%	4.70%	6.50%	3.40%	2.90%
20–50% black	3.40%	2.20%	4.60%	33.80%	12.80%	7.00%	19.40%	16.10%	7.70%
50–70% black	0.00%	0.80%	0.00%	17.20%	15.80%	10.50%	8.90%	12.70%	7.10%
70–90% black	2.10%	0.80%	1.00%	25.50%	26.30%	16.40%	21.80%	20.30%	12.40%
More than 90% black	72.60%	69.40%	74.90%	15.90%	40.60%	61.40%	43.60%	47.50%	70.00%
N	146	134	195	145	133	171	124	118	170

Note: Changes in N over time are due to moves out of state and inability to geocode some addresses.

* T-tests comparing Section-8 or Control means to Experimental mover means are significantly different, $p < 0.001$.

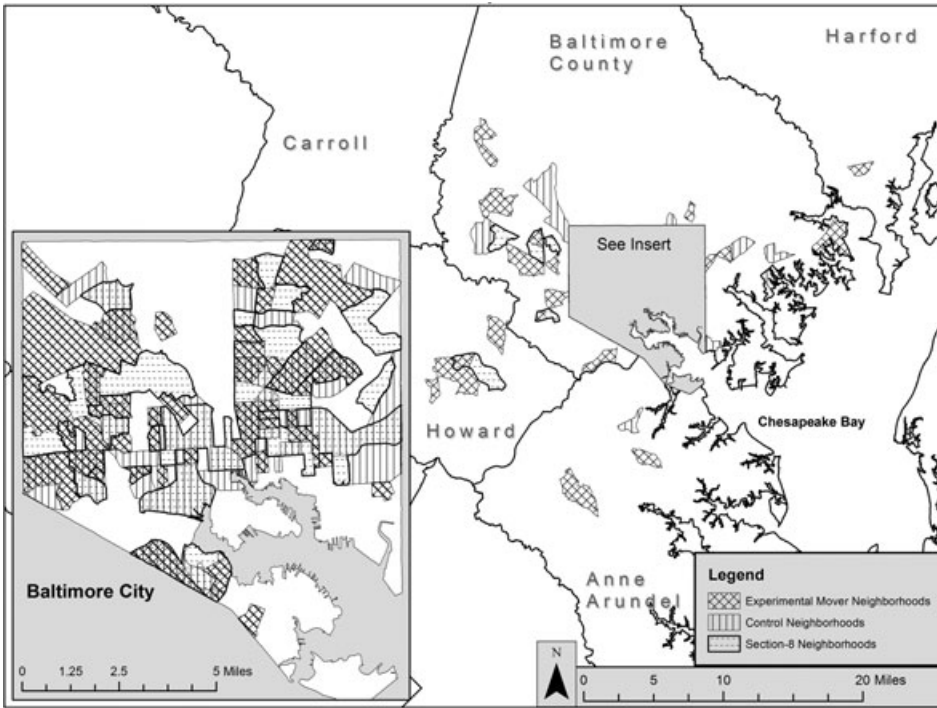


FIG. 1. Most recent neighborhoods for experimental movers, Section-8 movers, and controls.

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and authors' calculations.

Note: Neighborhoods are not scaled by number of families within them. 75% of Experimental movers, 86% of Section-8 movers, and 94% of controls were in Baltimore city by the Interim survey.

Section-8 movers ended up in neighborhoods that were more than 30 percent poor, and 4 in 10 moved to hypersegregated areas of the city.

The next columns of Table 1 show the most recent address for all three groups. One quarter of the experimental movers remained in neighborhoods that were less than 10 percent poor, a much higher figure than either Section-8 or control group families (at 9.3 percent and 4.1 percent, respectively). Yet a number of experimental movers returned to higher poverty and more segregated neighborhoods. While experimental movers were in neighborhoods that were significantly less poor than both controls and Section-8 users, they were not in neighborhoods that were significantly less segregated than the Section-8 group (these results concur with the experimental five city analyses conducted in Orr et al. 2003).

Figure 1 shows which neighborhoods families in all three groups were living in by the interim survey in 2002. While a number of experimental families (shown by the checked markings on the map) were living in low-poverty neighborhoods in the counties surrounding Baltimore, the map as a whole shows a high degree of overlap among the neighborhoods that families in all three groups were living in, especially within Baltimore city (see insert). By 2002, almost three-quarters (74 percent) of experimental mover families were living in the same neighborhoods as either control or Section-8 families. Analyses of spatial autocorrelation (Global Moran's I) showed that experimental mover

families were clustered in close proximity to each other rather than dispersed throughout the metropolitan area. The Moran's I statistic compares the distribution of experimental movers in central Maryland to a hypothetical random distribution. The clustering of experimental movers was significant ($p < 0.001$) at both first move and in 2002. This clustering and the significant overlap between families in all three groups reflects the ecological structuring of metropolitan areas along racial and class lines that has been highlighted in previous studies (Clark 2008; Sampson and Sharkey 2008; Sampson 2008).¹⁵ The spatial analysis adds to our interpretation of the results shown in Table 1 by emphasizing the geographic proximity and similarity in neighborhood attainment between experimental movers and families in the other two groups. Rather than finding housing in low-poverty areas throughout the metropolitan area, most families in the experimental group ended up clustered within 15 miles of the city center.

These longer-term results are not as dramatic as policymakers might have hoped. Four in 10 families were living in neighborhoods that were 20 percent poor or more. Segregation also remained high for many experimental group families, with more than 40 percent living in hypersegregated neighborhoods by 2002.¹⁶ Why didn't the program lead to greater dispersion of experimental movers into low-poverty neighborhoods, and why did families move back to higher poverty neighborhoods over time? How do we explain why families ended up in the neighborhoods in which they did?

The Constrained Housing Choice Set

In order to understand these mobility patterns, we compare where experimental mover families *actually* moved to where they *could have* moved. This analysis gives us an idea of the broader "choice set" available to families when they moved with their voucher. Comparing where families could have moved to where they did gives us an idea of the residential landscape that families negotiated and, in broad strokes, gives context for the residential choices they made.

Table 2 divides all of the census tracts in the Baltimore metropolitan region into those that were less than 10 percent poor in 1990 and those that were more than 10 percent poor in 1990.¹⁷ 1990 is used as the reference date because this census was used to set the poverty rate requirements for the MTO voucher (families first moved with the program between 1994 and 1998). The very first row of the table shows that there were 419 tracts that were low-poverty (less than 10 percent poor) in central Maryland. This is the total number of tracts within which MTO families could have theoretically used their voucher. The rightmost columns of the table ("Tract Characteristics") show the average characteristics of these 419 tracts according to the 2000 census. These tracts had low unemployment and poverty levels (3.7 percent and 5.4 percent, respectively), and were more than three-quarters white. By contrast, the 192 higher-poverty tracts had an average unemployment rate of 13.1 percent and were 26.7 percent poor and 35.9 percent white.

The third column of Table 2 shows that the experimental mover families leased up in only 55 of 419 available tracts (an additional seven families leased up in tracts that were more than 10 percent poor according to the 1990 census). This represents only 13 percent of the available neighborhoods to which they could have moved.

In analyses not shown, we analyzed the location of these moves using ArcGIS. We found that, while families were more dispersed than they had been when they signed up for the program, they were still significantly clustered within the Baltimore metropolitan area.¹⁸

TABLE 2. Neighborhood Choice Set Analysis

Census Tract Characteristics	First Move Location		Total tracts	Tract Characteristics: 2000 Census Data			
	No Experimental Movers (% of All Tracts)	At Least One Experimental Mover (% of all Tracts)		Avg. Rent (1999)	Avg. Unemployment Rate	Avg. Poverty Rate	Percent White
Poverty rate less than 10% in 1990	364 (87%)	55 (13%)	419	\$648	3.70%	5.40%	76.00%
... with bus access	264 (83%)	54 (17%)	318	\$644	4.00%	6.10%	71.90%
... and higher than 6% rental vacancy rate	85 (77%)	26 (23%)	111	\$604	4.50%	7.00%	67.00%
... and lower than 6% rental vacancy rate (tight)	179 (86%)	28 (14%)	207	\$666	3.70%	5.60%	73.40%
Poverty rate more than 10% in 1990	185 (96%)	7 (4%)	192	\$413	13.10%	26.70%	35.90%
... with bus access	180 (96%)	7 (4%)	187	\$412	13.00%	27.00%	34.90%
... and higher than 6% rental vacancy rate	107 (97%)	3 (3%)	110	\$387	13.80%	28.30%	31.60%
... and lower than 6% rental vacancy rate (tight)	71 (65%)	4 (5%)	75	\$460	11.50%	23.70%	39.30%

Not only were families in a small number of the total available census tracts, but these neighborhoods were spatially close to each other, suggesting that simply relaxing the affordability constraints with the voucher does not ensure mobility across most of the metropolitan area.

The pattern of residential moves observed may have resulted from the fact that the majority of experimental households did not have a car and relied on public transportation. Though Baltimore City has an extensive bus and light rail system, the areas outside of the city are not always well served. Almost one quarter (12 of 53) of the mothers in our interview study cited access to public transportation as one reason they were living in their current home. One woman assigned to the experimental group, Cookie,¹⁹ explained that she did not comply with the program and move to a low-poverty neighborhood because of transportation issues:

The buses only run a certain time and then they cuts off. So I don't believe nobody dictating to me that I gotta move here, no transportation even though I have driver license but I don't have a car. If my child gets sick ok you can call an ambulance, but if I need to get to the store I gotta walk down the road. . . . Like right now my job hours are 1-9 so if I'm out way in the county, and the bus stop running at 5 o'clock that's not good to me right now.

When we exclude census tracts that are not serviced by bus lines, the number of low-poverty tracts in which families could use their voucher drops by over 100, to 318. Almost

all of the experimental families who moved to low-poverty tracts moved to ones that were serviced by bus (see also Boyd et al. 2010).

Tracts also vary in their supply of rental housing, which is in part driven by whether rental units are available (or vacant). Tracts with very low vacancy rates are not fully “available” to prospective movers. When we split the 318 low-poverty public transportation-accessible tracts according to rental vacancy rate, we see that 207 of the 318 tracts had a rental vacancy rate below 6 percent, which is a common marker of a tight rental market (Belsky 1992). These calculations show that there is less available housing to choose from in low-poverty neighborhoods. Excluding neighborhoods with vacancy rates below 6 percent leaves 111 tracts. Experimental compliers found housing in 23 percent of these neighborhoods, which were slightly poorer (7 percent poverty rate) and less expensive (\$604 average rent in 1999) to rent in than the tighter-market neighborhoods. However, Table 2 also shows that a number of families succeeded in finding housing in census tracts with very low vacancy rates. Families leased up in 28 of the 207 neighborhoods with bus access but tighter rental markets.

While research shows that affordable rental units do exist in almost all census tracts in the country (Devine et al. 2003; Pendall 2000), it is important to note that for the low-income families in MTO, the housing voucher did not make all units in all neighborhoods affordable. Housing vouchers do have a limit on the maximum amount of rent that public housing authorities are permitted to pay landlords on behalf of tenants. This Fair Market Rent (FMR) limit is calculated as the 40th percentile rent for standard-quality housing units in the metropolitan region. This means that the majority of rental properties in a region, especially the mostly white and affluent areas in the city and suburbs, were unaffordable for the MTO families, further restricting the scope of possible units to which families could move.

In sum, structural constraints like access to public transportation or ease of finding a place to use the voucher explain some of the reasons families ended up where they did.²¹ Yet such constraints do not completely dictate where families moved. To reiterate, Table 2 shows that only about a quarter of the neighborhoods with bus access and loose housing markets received MTO voucher holders, and 14 percent of neighborhoods with bus access but tight housing markets managed to attract voucher holders. On average, these neighborhoods had lower unemployment and poverty rates than those with higher vacancy rates, and they were majority white. However as we saw in Table 1, subsequent moves brought families to neighborhoods that were higher in poverty than those in which they could have potentially used their vouchers. Structural constraints like those noted here also shaped these later moves.

However, while an understanding of these structural factors is necessary in order to explain the residential mobility observed in MTO, it is not sufficient to explain why some families moved to higher poverty communities than their vouchers would have given them access to. We turn next to the qualitative data, which sheds light on how families made these decisions to move, the way they evaluated different dimensions of housing and neighborhood quality, and how they made important trade-offs in the face of changing family needs. The interviews also allow us to understand how years of getting by in dangerous neighborhoods before receiving the MTO voucher shaped families' understanding of which areas can be lived in and what one can expect to have to endure living in an urban neighborhood.

Why Families Bounced Out of Low-Poverty Neighborhoods

While the larger MTO story is one of returns to higher poverty communities, most of the families in the experimental group who moved with their vouchers went to low-poverty neighborhoods, and one out of four were still in such areas 4–7 years later (Orr et al. 2003). Many successful movers were desperate to get out of the projects and were relieved, pleased, and excited about the initial MTO move (cf. Turney, Kissane, and Edin 2011). They raved about how their kids could now play outside rather than have to be confined to the house to avoid neighborhood violence. Mariah, an experimental mover, explained how leaving the projects meant her children were exposed to peers whose behavior was radically different than what she herself was exposed to as a child:

Here it's totally different. And even I'm adjusting to learning how to talk to them sometimes. . . . When I was coming up it was yelling and screaming whenever an issue arise. It was never sit down and talk to the kids. Now my children is moving into a environment where it's a little different. . . It's not a lot of fighting out here. You don't hear about kids getting beat up walking to school. You don't hear about kids all the time getting banged at school. The next door children, they fighting your children, somebody busting your windows. The child threw a rock at this child, that's the drama that goes on in the city which out here I don't have that problem.

Families' accounts confirmed that the desire to escape dangerous neighborhoods was the primary motivation that led most of them to volunteer for MTO. This finding is in line with the five-city survey data that show that "getting away from gangs and drugs" was the most frequently offered reason for wanting to move.²¹ At the time of the interim survey, adults in the experimental group had lower levels of self-reported mental distress, depression, and anxiety than controls (Kling, Liebman, and Larry 2007). These benefits might have come from the decreased stress felt by parents who no longer needed to constantly monitor their children to ensure their safety. Kiesha, an experimental mover, described her previous public housing complex by saying, "It's like they got you in a cage, they know what they doing. . . .It's just like a little square. You are in this hole, where all these people cramped in . . . you can't see out." Her neighborhood in Baltimore County was a welcome relief, both for her and her son:

Interviewer: How do you think living here affects Lamar?

Kiesha: He loves it. Because I let him go outside and play. I feel safe when he outside. Not like sometimes he comes home a little too late for me. Other than that, just a regular parent worrying about their child. No not like, oh I hear a gun go off is that my child you know. None of that, it's not of that it's just more where is he at, he's with his friends. "Oh I'm playing football" I go outside and walk and see him.

Experimental group families overwhelmingly talked about the importance of neighborhood safety when it came to raising children. Tyesha did not move with her MTO voucher, but moved in with her mother in another part of the city. Her description of what she and her mother looked for in a neighborhood during their housing search resembles the criteria described by several who did use their voucher to move: safety, peace, and quiet.

It was more quieter. There's homeowners on this block, too, but I guess it was less drug-infested. You didn't really see a lot of children playing out. If they were, they were probably in the back or in the house. But it was like a really nice, quiet neighborhood. That's what I was looking for, something stable to bring my children up in. That they would get something out of. And the school wasn't that far. It was like at the top of the hill. You know, I guess like a different environment, that's what drew me to it.

This finding echoes studies done in other cities with assisted households. Research with voucher holders and HOPE VI relocatees show that families involved in these housing programs ended up in safer neighborhoods than traditional housing projects (Lens, Ellen, and O'Regan 2011; Popkin and Cove 2007). Clearly, many families who participated in MTO in Baltimore also valued these kinds of neighborhoods.

Despite the desire to remain in low-poverty neighborhoods, families faced some difficulties staying in their housing units, with many being forced to move because of housing-related factors outside of their control. The majority (31 of 53) of participants had some complaints about the way their houses or apartments were managed. More often than not, these complaints were about serious neglect that resulted in structural damage, plumbing malfunctions, or rodent infestations (cf. Briggs, Popkin, and Goering 2010; Boyd et al. 2010; DeLuca, Garboden, and Rosenblatt forthcoming for examples from other cities). Other families had the houses they were living in sold out from underneath them, or had landlords reclaim the house for themselves. These experiences reflect the findings of the interim survey, showing that across all five MTO cities, the top two reasons that experimental families moved after initial lease-up were leasing problems (22 percent of families) and problems with landlords (20 percent of families) (Orr et al. 2003 p. 34).²²

In the face of landlord neglect, some families saw no other choice but to move, while others were forced out after the housing unit in which they were living failed to comply with Section-8 housing quality standards.²³ Candy, who had lived almost all of her life in high rise public housing, described the house to which she and her four children moved with her MTO voucher as her "dream house."

But I only had one problem—I was there for like about 2 years. The landlord, he didn't couldn't come and fix what needed to be fixed and then the garage would flood from the rain so it caused rats to come inside the basement through the window. So the Section-8 inspector came out here and inspected the whole house. I cried because I really didn't want to leave the house because I was so excited to have that house, you know, so after he came to inspect the house and told me: 'Ms. Jackson, I'm sorry to disappoint you but you have to find another house.'

For many families, moving with MTO was their first experience with private market landlords. The MTO program provided a voucher, counseling about the neighborhoods that families were required to lease up in, and occasional assistance to look at available units. For the most part, MTO families had to search for units on their own, and did not receive counseling for housing searches after their first move, leaving them at risk of moving back to poorer areas in the face of these subsequent instabilities. Part of the difficulty in navigating the rental market involved finding a landlord who would take the voucher, an issue that was particularly challenging for families in the experimental group

who were searching in some of the more expensive outlying suburbs in order to remain in the lower poverty areas.

Peaches, who originally moved into public housing because her home was condemned for high lead levels, explained how voucher users had to deal with bad reputations:

Peaches: . . . a lot of times you would get turned down because of the fact that you had a Section-8 voucher. And the stigma that comes with Section-8 voucher is that Section-8 people are nasty, dirty. You know not clean and tear up your property and all that. So we would get rejected most of the time.

Interviewer: How did that feel?

Peaches: It felt degrading, it felt bad. It just felt like you know everybody is not the same so give me a chance but they didn't see that.

When we interviewed Jacqueline, she was thrilled with her house in a low-crime neighborhood in Northeast Baltimore. Yet she recalled that during her housing search, one landlord refused to lease a house to her after finding out she had been living in an apartment:

I looked around for a house and I couldn't find a house. I seen this one particular house over on Ellis Avenue. I really liked that house, I said I would like to have it. I went to the rental office, and I talked to the people there, and they asked me some information. They said where you living now, I said, I live in an apartment. They said, how long you been living there? I said, I've been living there about three years. They said, no, we don't have no houses for you. [I said] What you mean, you ain't got no houses for me? He said, because you live in an apartment. I said, wait a minute . . . I grew up in a house. I cleaned it, I know how to clean a house and everything else. I said I live in an apartment now, can I get a home. He said, no, so I didn't get that house. And that stressed me out.

The parents we spoke with mentioned discrimination against renters or voucher users more often than racial discrimination. Unfortunately for renters in the larger Baltimore metropolitan area, it is not illegal to discriminate against voucher holders.²⁴ When they did perceive racial prejudice, parents told us that it was often in the form of extra scrutiny from neighbors, and in some cases was compounded by being a subsidized renter in an apartment complex comprised of more affluent, unassisted renters. Mariah told us that neighbors in her apartment complex had "been watching me from day one. They can tell you every step I done made around here." Her apartment complex started instituting rules requiring adults to keep their children under constant supervision. She was willing to go along with these rules to stay in what she felt was a peaceful, quiet area. But as neighbors started to complain to the management about her children, she felt singled out by untrue accusations:

And then it got where, I think it might have been prejudice, I don't know what happened. But someone put a note on my car stating, if you don't move your car it's gonna be towed 'cause it's been sitting here too long. And at the same time I was hearing this rumor, well they trying to move all these people from out of here. I don't know if they was talking about the black people, or the people that was on

the low-income rent, because . . . we're living in the same thing they're living in, but paying less rent, okay.

It is clear from the narratives that while many families who relocated to low-poverty areas desired to stay there, landlords and housing quality problems often pushed them out of their units. Over time, there were also other common life course events that led the MTO families to consider moving, such as children growing up and other family members departing or joining the household. However, unlike middle class families, who, when faced with similar dynamics, can afford to upgrade their housing to meet the needs of an expanding family, the MTO families faced serious affordability constraints that forced them to make tradeoffs between neighborhoods and dwelling space.

Trade-Offs: Life Cycle Changes and Unit Space

Clearly, many families perceived their low-poverty MTO neighborhoods to be good places to raise children, and neighborhood safety was important to MTO participants. Yet parents found that they needed to make “housing adjustments” to provide for their families over time (Rossi 1955). Most prominent among these was the need for more dwelling space—parents often talked about wanting additional storage space, a basement, or extra bedrooms for children. Over half of the sample mentioned interior space as something that attracted them to a particular unit, kept them in their current home, or prompted them to consider moving out.

Mothers often made explicit connections between dwelling space and family management (cf. Wood 2011). Peaches, an experimental group mother of three who worked part time at a uniform company, made her decision about where to move with her MTO voucher based on how big each apartment was, because “my kids are teenagers and I thought . . . ‘We cannot be bumping into each other in these apartments.’ We definitely need space, so space was the biggest thing for me.” For other parents, having enough space was what kept them in their current unit. Jane, a mother of four boys who worked numerous part time jobs to support her family, explained how she decided to renew her lease in public housing because it meant more room for less money than she would pay elsewhere:

I thought about renting at first but I knew for a fact, anywhere I would have inquired big enough to hold me and my family would have run me at least 700 dollars a month or more. And it was like, oh no, I found a place big enough to hold everybody comfortably even if they get bigger, still enough space regardless. This was perfect for my income and for you know enough room for my kids. And then I'm like well I'm getting central air, I'm getting 2 bathrooms. If I go anywhere else trying to get all this I'm really going to pay for it.

Mary had different strategies to house her four children and herself in the three bedroom units she was allotted in two different public housing complexes. In one housing project, the large rooms allowed her three sons to sleep in the same room, but in her current subsidized unit in a rebuilt HOPE VI development, it was hard for even two of them to share a room. When we spoke with her, she was planning to move, but described the trade-off she faced because in the city, “it's not hard to find housing but it's hard to

find a safe neighborhood. And since I . . . have a 13- and a 15-year-old I have to be cautious what type of neighborhood I put them in.”

Other parents we talked to had to move to accommodate life cycle and family changes. Sharon gave up her MTO voucher after moving to the county, and bought a house in a working class part of the city. She explained to the interviewer that drug activity was increasing in the neighborhood, but she was more concerned about having enough space for her growing family:

I need a bigger house, I need more room . . . I want to move really bad—it’s not so much that the neighborhood is bad, because I can deal with it, you know what I’m saying, but I need more space . . . I have three kids in a three-bedroom house and we buy clothes all the time, I’m running out of closet space.

Josie was in the control group, and spent a lot of time “doubled up” with family members or friends in the years since moving out of the projects. Without a voucher, she and her family pooled their money to pay the rent at their apartment in the county. But at the time of our interview, two additional family members had moved in with her, and she needed a bigger place. They looked in their current area, a community they appreciated because the children could safely play outside, but they couldn’t find a large enough unit. As a result, the family was poised to move back to the city, to what Josie referred to as a “bad neighborhood”:

See, I grew up in the city and, you know, like I’m telling you, in the city I have to watch [the kids] because there’s so much going on. And out here, I can put them out in the yard, or out front, and I can just keep coming out every now and then to check on them. But I don’t have to worry about somebody fighting and I got to get them out the way, or somebody acting crazy and bullets flying up and down the street.

Tina relished the “peace and quiet” she got from moving “far away from [her] family” in one of the city’s high-rise housing projects. She used her MTO voucher to move to an apartment in the county, but after staying for several years she was expecting a grandchild, and needed more room for her expanding family. She explained how the need for more space drove her to move, despite her feelings about the neighborhood:

I: And would you be moving for what reason?

R: More room, that’s the only reason because I love the area, I love the people, which I don’t know too many of them out here besides the ones that I work with. So that’s all the good part. But I would love to stay in this community right here, but it’s hard to get a three-bedroom out here in this area. It’s so hard.

Data from the American Housing Survey confirm Tina’s appraisal of the difficulties of finding a larger unit in the county—in 2007, there were twice as many three bedroom rentals in the city than in the surrounding counties.²⁵

Michelle lost her job and was living doubled up with her parents, trying to keep her kids away from the drug trafficking that took place right outside the door. She understood the link between housing and neighborhood quality, and lamented that she could not find

an apartment that she could afford in a neighborhood in which she wanted to raise her children:

Right now out there to get anything that's acceptable where you'll be a little bit comfortable it's like at least \$700 is going to be your minimum . . . I've been going through there and it's like, I would be comfortable with maybe like 6, 650. Just 7 seem like it's crossing that line, you know. Especially like right now, I have a car payment. I put myself in a position with a car payment whereas before I had a piece of junk but no car payment. But, so I have to consider that. But everything 6 is going to be right here. You know, in these kind of areas. And I just, I can't do it.

The difficulty of finding enough space to accommodate growing families in a safe neighborhood was compounded by the need to be near public transportation routes, the difficulties of locating an affordable unit in a low-poverty neighborhood where average rents are more than 50 percent higher (see Table 1), and then negotiating with a landlord who might not be willing to take the voucher. These structural constraints combined with planned and unplanned events forced families to make consequential trade-offs during these subsequent moves. In the following section, we describe how parents' past experiences of getting by in unsafe neighborhoods influenced how these trade-offs were made and worked to channel them into higher poverty neighborhoods.

Negotiating Space in any Neighborhood

Household heads revealed a number of strategies they used to mitigate the risk of living in neighborhoods that might seem dangerous to outsiders. As employed by moms and taught to their children through rules that limited their play areas, these strategies reduced the chance of conflict with drug dealers or open violence in the neighborhood. These strategies were adaptations to having lived in high crime areas in the past, often in public housing. They did not necessarily reflect a *desire* to live in unsafe areas, but were part of how families *coped* with living in higher crime neighborhoods, and allowed some mothers to feel that they could "live anywhere."

One of the most common adaptations that came across in our interviews was "telescoping," or defining the neighborhood as the blockface. More than 40 percent of the MTO experimental movers broke down their neighborhoods by blocks when talking about safety, and most did not make connections between crime in the larger neighborhood and that on their single block. "Telescoping" to define their living space by the blockface meant that families rated neighborhoods that might on the whole seem unsafe as manageable, because of their assessment of the space right outside their front door. Lisa moved out of the projects with her MTO voucher right before they were demolished. At the time of the interview, she had lived in her current neighborhood in South Baltimore for five years. She explained how she negotiates her neighborhood by avoiding certain parts of the block:

The safety, it's okay because I might see a police car ride up and down the street maybe like two or three times a day. You know, at nighttime, it's very quiet down this end. Up here at the corner, it be a lot of young guys sometimes, usually stand out there on the corner. They be selling drugs up there . . . when I go and get in my car

I would sometimes make a U-turn and go back up or I'll cut through the alley and drive up Martin street.

Paige moved to the county with her MTO voucher, but was harassed by her landlord at work and at home, and left the apartment after a year. She struggled unsuccessfully to find another place in the county neighborhood that would accept her voucher, so ended up moving back to west Baltimore. She told us that she felt safe on her current block, but that the neighborhood changes radically one block over:

For the most part, this block seems to be kind of quiet. Now, the blocks up the street . . . when you get on up those blocks up there, that's when you get a lot of drug activity and stuff like that. It's like, when you leave this block, you go into a whole another somethin'.

Tyesha confronted the drug dealers that would sometimes congregate in front of her west Baltimore row home. She was unable to secure a lease with her MTO voucher, and ended up living with her mother on a street with drug dealers on either corner. She told the interviewer that although she wasn't in the quiet neighborhood she tried to move to with her MTO voucher, she thought her family would be safe, because having grown up there, "everybody knows everybody on this block and can look out for each other. . . . And we don't allow no drug dealer, on this part of the block anyway. . . . We send [them] 'round the corner. We tell 'em, 'You can't come here. You can't be in front of the door. Go around the corner. Go down on the corner, wherever. . . . [And] they move. They don't have no problem. They give us that much respect."

Sharon moved out of public housing to her dream home—a single-family house in east Baltimore—with an MTO voucher. She has stayed for seven years—there is drug activity up the street, and a couple of weeks prior to the interview there had been a shoot-out between rival gangs there. But for the most part Sharon finds the neighborhood safe, because she can avoid the drug activity. She also instructs her grandchildren, who live with her, to avoid those areas. She explained that she worries about her grandson riding his bike, and that "I told him at night time don't go past that light pole up in the middle of the block, 'cause that's when the drug start, all those at the corner. But I don't trust it past the light."

Like Sharon, other parents used their habit of "telescoping" to designate safe areas for their children to play in the neighborhood. These strategies were often central to their notions of good parenting in less safe areas—along with keeping closer watch on their kids when they went outside, or keeping them primarily in the house. Shawnies lived at her MTO-move apartment for six years, until her landlord refused to renew her lease. She struggled to find a new place with her voucher, and took an apartment in west Baltimore out of desperation. She explained to us that she hates the neighborhood as a whole, but keeps her kids close:

Yeah, and they fight up in the next block, I mean big, huge fights where the police come and mace people . . . you probably would hear the ambulance or the police around here, you might hear it every night or whatever. But this is about the quietest the block is, this block right here is nice, don't get me wrong. I wouldn't change the block I live on for the world, this is a nice block. But these surrounding

blocks is a mess. And my kids never wanna stay on this street, they always somewhere else. . . . And I keeps them in the house and they be so mad. I find everything to keep them in the house.

Another common strategy for living in dangerous neighborhoods was to “mind your own business.” In addition to avoiding certain parts of the neighborhood, minding one’s business meant being quiet, not borrowing from neighbors, and not getting involved with conflicts in the neighborhood. “Keeping one’s head down” or “keeping to oneself” was described by many as part of what it meant to be a good neighbor. As with negotiating neighborhoods block-by-block, this was primarily a strategy for avoiding confrontation:

So I mean because it’s getting to be a mess around here, these little young boys coming up, they don’t have any guidance and they out here on the street with the mopeds and, you know, getting to be sellin drugs, don’t know nothin about what they doin, just trying to get a quick dollar.

I: And do they live here, the boys?

R: Some of em do but they maybe two streets over or two streets down or something like that, but I don’t know, they say you never sell drugs where you rest at or something, that’s like that. So I guess they figure they find somewhere close to home but not at home, you know what I mean. But I mind my business, I don’t get involved with these people. I work and live for my kids.

Prior experience in public housing meant that many of our respondents felt they could rely on their ability to raise their children in high crime areas should the need arise. Jane, who grew up in public housing, described how her ability to negotiate space gave her confidence that she could “live anywhere”:

It’s pretty much the same because it’s still living in the city. So it’s not but so many things that are going to change, I mean if I had to do it all over again. If push come to shove, yeah I could live there, I could pretty much live anywhere. And I tell people all the time, as bad as people make it seem, this is not that bad living in the projects. It’s really not.

Those who expressed this outlook tended to emphasize that parenting style or way of living mattered more than neighborhood environment. As Sharon put it, “it’s trouble everywhere, it’s not where you live, it’s how you live. You mind your business, you don’t have to worry about nothing.” This confidence in their own ability to get by allowed some families to widen the scope of places that they were willing to live, which was significant given the constraints they faced in staying in or moving to low-poverty neighborhoods. Karen’s belief in her ability to raise her children anywhere supported her rationale for living in an environment that she didn’t like, but stayed in because of concerns about affordability and job security:

I’m here because it’s really what I can afford even though I’m working three jobs. It’s convenient because we don’t have to pay no gas and no electric. . . . We pay rent. But, it’s low-income, but it’s not you know, not for people that work. Since they go on one-third of your rent. I pay \$457.00 a month. When some people only were

paying \$20.00 or \$40.00, whatever. It's kind of frustrating, but I look at it like I don't have to pay gas and electric. I don't have to pay a water bill. I plan on leaving, but I can't just up and run out there. Might lose my job and then I'll be having to live with somebody else. I got to think about that, you know. But I love my little place, but I don't like the environment and I tell my children. They all be hollering, "When we going to move?" It's not where you live, it's how you live. You know, we don't live outside, we live in here. . . . People raise their children different from the way I raise mine, you know. 'Cause we live in the project, that don't mean we have to act like the project and stuff like that.

Parents' capabilities for negotiating unsafe neighborhoods emerged from prior experience. The existence of these strategies does not imply that families prefer to live in unsafe neighborhoods, but suggests a willingness and an ability to cope with such places should the need arise. Not all families in the program ended up back in unsafe or high-poverty neighborhoods. But for those who struggled to meet their housing needs with low incomes, or without a car, or in the face of landlords who would not rent to Section-8 voucher holders, these strategies offered a way to get by.

DISCUSSION

In Baltimore, the MTO program produced neighborhood poverty results similar to those in the other four cities. Table 1 shows that a full quarter of the families who used the voucher were still living in low-poverty neighborhoods four to seven years after initially moving, a significantly higher percentage than might have made such moves without the program's assistance (only 4 percent of controls were living in low-poverty neighborhoods by the interim survey). However, the improvements in neighborhood poverty level that experimental mover families saw at the time of their first move were not maintained over time for the majority of the group. Many experimental group families were also in segregated neighborhoods, and they were clustered in a handful of neighborhoods in the Baltimore metropolitan area rather than spread throughout the region's low-poverty neighborhoods. Four in 10 had moved back to neighborhoods that were 20 percent poor or more by the time of the interim survey.

Our findings highlight the structural constraints that partially explain why families moved where they did. Access to transportation shaped how families weighed the decision to stay in the county or move to a different location. Table 2 shows that almost all experimental families who moved to low-poverty areas with their voucher went to areas that were served by bus lines. But just being near a bus line was not always sufficient—less frequent stops and limited service hours in the county were a concern to mothers who needed public transportation to get kids to the doctor, to go to work, or to shop. Our interviews also revealed that not only moving, but staying in a unit was a difficult prospect, with landlords who let building maintenance lapse to such a degree that they failed the yearly housing inspection, forcing families to move or lose their voucher.

Low-income families in Baltimore also face a severe shortage of affordable housing, and the successful lease-up rate for voucher holders nationwide declined from 81 percent to 69 percent between 1993 and 2000, a drop that can be attributed to tightening housing markets (Newman 2005; Finkel and Buron 2001). In their study of MTO, Briggs and

colleagues (2010) show that the percentage of MTO families who were living in low-poverty neighborhoods at the time of the interim survey reflected the distribution of affordable housing opportunities in the five different metropolitan areas. Our analysis of census tract-level vacancy rates in Table 2 did not show this kind of structural pattern at the submetropolitan level, but our interviews revealed how families struggled to find affordable units in the kinds of neighborhoods in which they wanted to live.

Families revealed how they wrestled with structural constraints, and the kinds of trade-offs they had to make. More than half of the families saw moving as a way to access safer environments for their children. Yet limited economic resources and changing family dynamics meant that families had a hard time staying in these kinds of neighborhoods. Having adequate dwelling space was important, as parents often talked about needing more room as their children and families grew larger (see also Wood 2011 for a discussion of housing unit preferences and parenting among low-income families). Finding housing with this kind of space was made more difficult by low incomes (appendix Table A1 shows that the average household income was a little over \$16,000 a year for members of our qualitative sample). Our interviews reveal that families often struggled to find the kind of housing they needed in the kinds of neighborhoods they most wanted to live.²⁶

In order to balance these competing housing needs in the face of constrained options, families made trade-offs between dwelling space and neighborhood quality, and drew upon past experience to safely negotiate higher crime neighborhoods. Intimate knowledge of neighborhood boundaries was used as a way to stay safe. Many of the women interviewed expressed a form of “street efficacy” (Sharkey 2006; see also Suttles 1968) that allowed them to negotiate unsafe neighborhoods by avoiding dangerous corners, staying inside after a certain time of night, or making it known to neighbors that they were not involved with drugs or gangs. This latter strategy is part of what women referred to as “minding one’s business.” This experience gave them the confidence to, as Jane, a lifetime resident of public housing, put it, “live anywhere.” These attitudes and strategies for getting by were shaped by a lifetime of living in high-poverty, dangerous neighborhoods, and remained with families as they thought about other neighborhoods in which it would be possible for them to live.²⁷ Dispositions like “it’s not where you live, it’s how you live,” or “we don’t live outside, we live in here” reveal that when participants were forced to choose between the need for dwelling space and the desire for safe neighborhoods, they relied on tried and true methods for moving through dangerous areas, which allowed them to minimize the potential consequences of trading neighborhood quality for housing unit need.

CONCLUSION

A wealth of research shows that low-income African American families, like those who participated in MTO, face barriers to moving into low-poverty, nonsegregated neighborhoods. While we know that the residential landscape is stratified, individuals also act within this structure to move to neighborhoods on the basis of past experience, family conditions, landlord connections, local knowledge, and imperfect information. While it can be difficult to assess the degree to which the residential landscape is shaped by structural barriers or by individual mobility choices, examining these dynamics is important both for assessing the promise and limitations of policy interventions like MTO,

as well as for understanding more general processes of social stratification in urban settings.

In this paper, we highlight some of the reasons that families did not move to, and stay in, low-poverty neighborhoods. Myriad structural barriers, from public transportation access and affordable housing availability to landlord biases and poor quality housing units, made it difficult for families to make permanent escapes from higher poverty neighborhoods. But families also had unique strategies, worldviews, and logics, which shaped how they found housing within these constraints.

However, what families didn't say was as interesting as what they did say about why they lived in their communities: none of the MTO families mentioned a preference for same race neighbors and few mentioned moving or staying to be closer to relatives. In fact, roughly as many people (12 of 53) mentioned needing to move *away* from friends or family who were a "bad influence" or a drain on their resources as wanted to move to maintain social ties (10 of 53). This finding echoes that of other recent research on MTO mobility (Briggs, Comey, and Weismann 2010), which found that social ties did not factor strongly in how families discussed moving. This finding contrasts with much of the classic literature on racial preferences and the reliance on kin (e.g., Clark 1991, 1992; Stack 1974).

Instead, the interviews reveal two key findings, which bear on our understanding of whether housing policies will connect families to communities of opportunity. First, when faced with financial constraints, families often sacrifice neighborhood quality for dwelling unit needs. Second, poor families often think about their neighborhood as their block-face, not the larger community area, and they trust their ability to "handle" rough neighborhoods. Turning inward to focus on the home space and the limited area around their house makes sense as a mechanism for getting by in dangerous urban communities. However, these strategies suggest that housing programs cannot assume families will search the whole menu of metropolitan neighborhoods as possible destinations when they are given the chance to move to new communities. Rather, these families will need sustained housing counseling to learn about the benefits of different kinds of communities, to search for affordable quality housing in these areas, and to negotiate with landlords (see DeLuca et al. 2010).

Even with housing counseling, however, the social structural dynamics of our urban areas pose significant challenges to minority families seeking housing. Previous research has documented the durability of these patterns of racial and economic segregation (Sampson and Sharkey 2008; Quillian 2003). Our analyses show that the residential locations of controls, Section-8, and experimental movers overlap significantly after subsequent moves, suggesting that families are responding to the structural constraints and availabilities of the housing market. The interviews, however, also indicate that a simultaneous, reciprocal social process is occurring: over the course of their lives, families become accustomed to such constraints, find ways to operate within them, and make circumscribed choices on the basis of those past experiences. It is important for research to recognize the interplay of both structural forces and these kinds of adaptations in producing the residential patterns we see in our urban areas.

We also hope that this study contributes to the larger literature on segregation, concentrated poverty, and residential sorting. In part, our paper was motivated by a call from fellow urban sociologists for focused research that considers the residential decision-making processes of low-income families—what people are thinking about when they decide to

move somewhere, how voluntary their choices really are, and the benefits and costs to various alternatives.²⁸ Here we respond to this gap in the literature by demonstrating how poor families perceive their residential options within social structural constraints, as well as by emphasizing some of the factors that rank highly in their decisions. Specifically, we have described some of the individual level processes that contribute to and are a function of the “racial income hierarchy of neighborhoods” (Sampson and Sharkey 2008, p. 27). However, we could not fully explore the decision-making processes behind residential choices as we did not systematically explore all of the factors that poor families consider when making a move, how they rank all of these factors against one another, and whether families perceive that they are making a choice about where to live based on selecting one of their ranked options. Our study is also limited by its focus on the very low-income minority families who signed up for the chance to move with MTO. Patterns of mobility and decisions about housing and neighborhood trade-offs likely differ among unassisted renters or families with moderate incomes. Clearly, there is need for more research on the topic, and we hope others will respond to the important call to understand why people live where they do.

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Notes

¹ Throughout this paper, we conceptualize “high opportunity” or “opportunity rich” neighborhoods as low poverty, nonsegregated areas. A wealth of research shows that racial residential segregation and concentrated poverty isolates African Americans from higher performing schools, safer neighborhoods, and connections to employment opportunities and other types of “bridging” social capital that can aid upward mobility (cf. Massey and Denton 1993; Briggs 2005; Shihadeh and Flynn 1996; Peterson and Krivo 1999).

² See DeLuca and Dayton (2009) and Popkin et al. (2003) on residential mobility programs around the country.

³ The Housing Choice Voucher covers the difference between 30 percent of the household’s monthly income and the locally determined payment standard for rent (see: <http://www.hud.gov/offices/pih/programs/hcv/about/fact.sheet.cfm>). See Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum (2000) and Polikoff (2006) for a comprehensive history of the litigation and program implementation for Gautreaux.

⁴ To be eligible for MTO, families had to be living in public housing in a census tract with a poverty rate in excess of 40 percent according to the 1990 census (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering 2010). As noted in DeLuca et al. (2010) and Rosenbaum and Zuberi (2010), the differences between MTO and Gautreaux extend beyond the fact that MTO was a randomized field trial and Gautreaux was a court ordered desegregation remedy, or that Gautreaux was a race-based program and MTO was poverty based. In the Gautreaux program, families were assigned to housing units found for them by housing counselors working intensely in outreach efforts with landlords. In MTO, some families were given housing search assistance and counseling about making moves to low-poverty areas, but ultimately they found their own units. These program design differences could

help explain why MTO families did not move to the kinds of low poverty, integrated communities that the Gautreaux families did, but because the two programs occurred 20 years apart and in very different economic and policy contexts, it would be premature to definitively conclude that (DeLuca et al. 2010 discuss this in detail).

⁵ The individual level outcomes were also mixed. On the one hand, experimentals had lower levels of depression, diabetes, and obesity than those in the control group. On the other hand, the experiment neither led to significant increases in employment or reductions in welfare receipt for adults, nor were there differences in educational outcomes among children (Orr et al. 2003; Sanbonmatsu et al. 2011). Briggs, Popkin, and Goering (2010) also explore all of these results in depth for the interim and final impacts evaluation.

⁶ Although HOPE VI was a place-based program, many families who relocated from the rebuilt housing projects did so with Section-8 vouchers. However, these families did not receive the kind of housing counseling that was built into the MTO or Gautreaux programs (Kingsley, Johnson, and Pettit 2003).

⁷ Gautreaux researchers used an administrative feature of the program to create a “quasi-experimental” design that compared outcomes for families who moved to the suburbs to outcomes for families who moved within the city of Chicago. While families could theoretically choose to move to either location, in practice families in the queue for vouchers tended to take the first unit offered to them, making a case for quasi-random assignment of families to either city or suburb (see Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum (2000) and DeLuca et al. (2010) for details on design).

⁸ In Baltimore, 41 percent of experimental movers moved to census tracts that increased in poverty during the 1990s (Orr et al. 2003, p. 31).

⁹ In Baltimore, 96 percent of household heads who participated in MTO were African American. Across all five cities, 63 percent of participants were African American, and 30 percent were Hispanic (Orr et al. 2003).

¹⁰ The term “experimental movers” refers to families who were randomly assigned to the experimental group and successfully “leased up” (i.e., found a unit that met Section-8 Housing Quality Standards, and a landlord that would take the voucher). Across all five cities, 47.4 percent of experimental families leased up, while in Baltimore 58 percent of experimental families leased up.

¹¹ Mobility was high among control groups in all five cities. In Baltimore, 171 of the 195 control group families (88 percent) moved between the time they enrolled in the program and the time of the interim survey. This high mobility was likely due to the concurrent HOPE VI program, which demolished many of the housing projects in which families were initially living.

¹² One hundred and forty-nine families were the target sample, with 124 heads of household successfully interviewed.

¹³ For the qualitative sample, we used all of the interviews that were conducted with experimental movers ($N = 33$) and all of the interviews collected with the experimental noncompliers, who did not use their voucher to lease up in a low-poverty neighborhood ($N = 10$). We used the interviews in both of these groups to identify patterns across cases of families who received both counseling and a voucher to move to low-poverty communities. The experimental movers provide a window into the processes for families who successfully negotiated the private rental market at least once, while the noncompliers give us examples of families who were offered the same counseling and voucher, but could not lease up. The reasons this latter group did not use their vouchers are important for understanding residential decision making. We selected a random sample of all the control group families that were interviewed as a comparison for the experimental noncompliers ($N = 10$), to see if the mobility of noncompliers may have been influenced in any way by the offer of a voucher. Controls and experimental noncompliers had virtually identical mobility patterns, and did not differ systematically in their responses to interviewer’s questions about neighborhoods, housing, or moving.

¹⁴ The 33 experimental movers were initially required to move to low-poverty neighborhoods. Some might argue that the interview data tell us more about families moving within a specific program than about low-income family moves in general. However, the interviews were done in 2003 and 2004, 6–10 years after families

first moved with the voucher. Thus the discussions often focus on more recent moves, for which there were no restrictions on where families could lease up. As appendix Table A1 shows, families tended to move multiple times since the initial move, providing many experiences of mobility without a voucher restriction.

¹⁵ Our GIS analysis alone is unable to account for the reasons families in all three groups were clustered close to the city. We address some of the possible reasons driving these geographic outcomes in the following sections.

¹⁶ Because MTO was a poverty deconcentration program and not a racial desegregation remedy, we do not discuss in detail the racial composition of the neighborhoods to which MTO families moved. However, research has long documented the significance of racial segregation for family and child outcomes and thus it is an important consideration. Table 1 shows that MTO experimental movers did relocate to slightly less segregated neighborhoods than Section-8 or control group families. However, most MTO movers did not relocate to primarily white neighborhoods although most of the low-poverty tracts in the Maryland region are mostly white, MTO movers did not relocate to these tracts (Table 2). It is instructive to compare the results from MTO to those from Gautreaux and the recent Baltimore Thompson Mobility Program. Only about 8 percent of the MTO experimental movers moved to neighborhoods that were less than 20 percent black (Table 1). In the Gautreaux program, 63 percent of the families moved to such neighborhoods (DeLuca and Rosenbaum 2003) and in Baltimore's Thompson program, 99 percent of families moved to neighborhoods that were mostly white (DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2009). While there were significant declines in the numbers of MTO families living in the most hypersegregated neighborhoods, these are a fraction of those seen as a result of mobility programs that are explicitly race based. However, in order to accomplish desegregation goals, Gautreaux and Thompson had to focus significant attention on overcoming the barriers that keep minority families out of high opportunity areas. Gautreaux's approach was the most direct, with housing counselors assigning families to units in mostly white areas. In the Thompson program, families are supported through move readiness counseling, suburban community tours, security deposit assistance, and housing counselors who educate them about the school opportunities in the suburbs and assist with subsequent mobility.

¹⁷ There are 615 census tracts in this region, 611 of which had tract-level poverty data in the 1990 census. These constitute all of the tracts in Baltimore City, as well as Baltimore County, Anne Arundel, Carroll, Harford, and Howard Counties, which are the suburban counties contiguous to Baltimore City.

¹⁸ We used the Global Moran's I statistic, which compared the distribution of experimental movers across tracts in central Maryland to a hypothetical random distribution. Clustering was significant ($p < 0.001$) at both first move and in location at 2002. We also looked at clustering within the smaller set of bus-accessible tracts, and found that experimental movers were still significantly more clustered than in a hypothetical random distribution.

¹⁹ Respondents are referred to by pseudonyms they chose during the interview. Names of children, streets, and neighborhoods have been changed.

²⁰ While out of the scope of the current paper, MTO families were also subject to additional choice-limiting constraints when looking for low-poverty housing. First, MTO did not remove the burdensome voucher portability procedures that could have streamlined the use of MTO vouchers outside the Housing Authority of Baltimore City's jurisdiction (see DeLuca, Garboden and Rosenblatt forthcoming for more details on these aspects of the voucher policy). Second, in Baltimore, landlords may also have been hesitant to take vouchers because the housing authority had become notorious for late payments and inspection delays. In addition, Baltimore and its adjacent counties did not have source-of-income protection that could have prevented landlords from refusing to lease to voucher holders.

²¹ At the time of the baseline survey, families were asked, "What is the main reason you want to move?"

²² Boyd et al. (2010) found very similar results for families who moved with the second round of the Gautreaux program—half moved at the 1-year point, with unit and landlord problems cited as the leading reasons for mobility.

²³ In compliance with federal regulations, the local housing authority conducts annual inspections of the properties leased under the housing voucher program. Failure to pass such inspections can result in the termination of the current lease agreement and require the family to move into a new unit.

²⁴ In the Baltimore metropolitan area, only Howard County has a law barring source of income discrimination (Poverty and Race Research Action Council 2011).

²⁵ Data refer to occupied rental units in Baltimore city and two surrounding counties (Baltimore County and Anne Arundel County). Source: American Housing Survey for the Baltimore Metropolitan Area: 2007, table 4–3.

²⁶ Other research with MTO families documents additional hardships that compromised moves to higher opportunity areas. Profound mental and physical health challenges, the deaths of family members and other family instabilities, and the unpredictable nature of low-wage work all served to destabilize the context in which residential decisions were being made, and create a landscape of shifting and competing priorities for how money and time were spent (Turney, Kissane, and Edin 2011; DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2010; Turney et al. 2006).

²⁷ These beliefs and strategies call to mind Bourdieu's concept of habitus, or the unconscious perceptions of what is possible that guide action. Bourdieu argues that when deciding how to act, "agents shape their aspirations according to concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not 'for us'" (Bourdieu 1990, p. 64).

²⁸ In particular, we wish to acknowledge the comments of John Logan and Herb Gans in an exchange on the Community and Urban Sociology Section's listserve, January 2008.

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"No vivimos fuera. Vivimos aquí": Decisiones de Movilidad Residencial y Barrial en Familias de Bajos Ingresos. (Peter Rosenblatt y Stefanie DeLuca)

Resumen

Más de veinte años de investigación señalan que vivir en los barrios más pobres y peligrosos de Estados Unidos afecta negativamente el desarrollo de niños y adultos. En los 90, las condiciones difíciles de algunos de estos barrios, especialmente aquellos con grandes proyectos de vivienda pública, hicieron necesarias políticas públicas importantes. Además de la demolición y regeneración de varios de estos proyectos de vivienda pública, el gobierno federal lanzó un experimento para ayudar a las familias a salir de barrios pobres a través de un proyecto asistido de vivienda en base a cupones llamado *Moving to Opportunity* (MTO). Mientras que familias que se mudaron por medio de este proyecto inicialmente se reubicaron en zonas censales con tasas de pobreza casi cuatro veces menor que en el de sus lugares de origen (los *Projects*), varias familias volvieron a barrios con pobreza moderada o alta. ¿Por qué? Usamos métodos mixtos para explorar los patrones y los procesos de toma de decisiones detrás de los movimientos de las familias que participaron en el proyecto MTO. Enfocándonos en el caso del MTO de Baltimore, encontramos que las teorías tradicionales sobre elección del lugar de residencia no explicaban satisfactoriamente estos resultados. Mientras el acceso restringido al transporte público, problemas de calidad de la vivienda y los arrendadores hicieron difícil para las familias el mudarse hacia o el permanecer en barrios con baja pobreza, hubieron otras explicaciones más significativas para entender las trayectorias residenciales. Muchas familias valoraban

positivamente los barrios con baja pobreza a los que originalmente tuvieron acceso a través de los cupones del MTO, pero cuando tenían que enfrentar el problema de volver a mudar, muchas veces sacrificaban la calidad del barrio por la calidad de la vivienda para satisfacer necesidades familiares cambiantes. Habiendo vivido en barrios de alta pobreza la mayor parte de sus vidas, estas familias desarrollaron una serie de estrategias y creencias para sentirse seguros que podían sobrellevar los costos de esta decisión y para protegerse a sí mismos y a sus hijos de los peligros existentes en las áreas más pobres.

APPENDIX

TABLE A1. Interview Sample Characteristics

Qualitative Sample Characteristics*	
Average Age	37
Average Household Income	\$16,290
Employment	
Employed	70%
Unemployed	30%
Education	
HS dropout	30%
HS grad/GED	50%
Some college	18%
College grad	2%
Housing Tenure	
Renter	82%
Home owner	14%
Doubled up	4%
Average Number of Moves Since Random Assignment	3.2
Average percent of Persons in Poverty, Current Neighborhood	
Experimental movers	19%
Experimental non-movers	40%
Controls	42%

*All data except number of moves comes from Interim Evaluation Survey. Three families missing interim survey data $N = 50$.