

42 ■ James E. Rosenbaum and Stefanie DeLuca

Does Changing Neighborhoods Change Lives?

The Chicago Gautreaux Housing Program

Neighborhood effects on the lives of families and young people have long been an important topic of research, and communities are also an important topic for current public policy. Theoretically, neighborhoods are important contexts for socialization and development as well as places where we see structures of inequality and opportunity in action. Neighborhoods are also significant because they are closely tied to schooling opportunities, given the zoning of public schools. The possibility of choosing different schools, including schools in different neighborhoods, is intended to be a central piece of the No Child Left Behind legislation, and federal courts are currently considering whether to mandate racial or socioeconomic integration in housing and school settings (*Thompson v. HUD*; *Meredith and Parents* cases). Neighborhoods have also become the focus of many recent policy discussions. Residential mobility and housing policy garnered national attention after the hurricane disaster in New Orleans, and HOPE VI demolitions are leading to the relocation of inner city families all over the country.

Despite years of research on these topics, it is hard to know for sure if neighborhoods can be used as policy levers to improve youth and family well-being. This is due in large part to two related issues. First, despite relatively high levels of residential mobility in the United States, we see little variation in the types of communities low-income mi-

nority families inhabit. Often, poor families are trapped in dangerous neighborhoods and their children are trapped in poor schools (South and Deane 1993; South and Crowder 1997; Massey and Denton 1993). Therefore, we don't get the chance to observe how a *different* environment might affect their life chances. Second, families choose neighborhoods, and the characteristics of families that lead them to choose certain neighborhoods are also likely to affect family and child well-being. This leads to the selection problem (endogeneity), which plagues our attempts to recover causal estimates of environmental effects. However, there have been some opportunities to study what happens when parents and children experience moderate to radical changes in their neighborhood or schooling environments. Residential mobility programs, where poor families relocate to opportunity-rich communities via housing vouchers, provide one way we can begin to separate the effects of family background and neighborhood conditions. In this chapter, we review one particularly important mobility plan—Chicago's Gautreaux program—and examine a decade of research following the fortunes of the families who moved as a part of this intervention.

The Gautreaux Program

As a result of a 1976 Supreme Court decision, the Gautreaux program allowed low-income

black public housing residents in Chicago to receive Section 8 housing certificates (or vouchers) and move to private-sector apartments either in mostly-white suburbs or within the city. Between 1976 and 1998, over 7,000 families participated, and over half moved to suburban communities. Because of its design, the Gautreaux program presents an unusual opportunity: it allows us to examine whether individual outcomes change when low-income black families move to safer neighborhoods with better labor markets and higher quality schools.

Gautreaux participants circumvented the typical barriers to living in suburbs, not by their jobs, finances, or values, but by acceptance into the program and quasi-random assignment to the suburbs. The program provided housing subsidy vouchers and housing support services, but not employment or transportation assistance. Unlike the usual case of working-class blacks living in working-class suburbs, Gautreaux permitted low-income blacks to live in middle- and upper-income white suburbs. Participants moved to more than 115 suburbs throughout the six counties surrounding Chicago. Suburbs with a population that was more than 30 percent black were excluded by the consent decree. A few very high-rent suburbs were excluded by funding limitations of Section 8 certificates.

Early Findings

Early research on Gautreaux had shown large and significant relationships between placement neighborhoods and subsequent gains in employment and education. A study of 330 Gautreaux mothers in the early 1990s found that suburban movers had higher employment levels than city movers, but not higher earnings, and the employment difference was especially large for adults who were unemployed prior to the move (Rosenbaum 1997). Another study found that as young adults, Gautreaux children who moved to the suburbs were more likely than city movers to

graduate from high school, attend college, attend four-year colleges (vs. two-year colleges), and if they were not in college, to be employed and to have jobs with better pay and with benefits (Rosenbaum 1995). These differences were very large, often larger than the effects of education and training programs targeted at these specific outcomes.

Analyses indicated that children moving to suburbs were just as likely to interact with neighbors as city movers, but the suburb movers interacted with white children while city movers interacted mostly with black children. The program seems to have been effective at integrating low-income black children into middle-class white suburbs. Although suburban schools were often far ahead of city schools in terms of curriculum level, mothers reported that suburban teachers often extended extra efforts to help their children catch up with the class. Initial concerns that these children would not be accepted were unsupported by the evidence.

Recent Research

To improve upon the design and data quality of the earlier work, more recent research used administrative data to locate recent addresses for a 50 percent random sample of Gautreaux movers who had relocated before 1990, as well as track economic outcomes for mothers.¹ Additionally, multiple census measures were used to characterize neighborhoods and a more comprehensive accounting for preprogram characteristics was employed in the regression models. The use of administrative records permitted us to locate 1,504 of 1,507 families, and we found that 66 percent of suburban movers remained in the suburbs an average of 15 years after placement. After premove individual and neighborhood attributes were controlled, the racial composition of placement neighborhood predicted racial composition of current neighborhood (DeLuca and Rosenbaum 2003), and mothers continued to live in areas with much

lower poverty rates and higher household incomes (Keels et al. 2005).

Individual level economic outcomes, such as welfare receipt, employment, and earnings, were also influenced by the income and racial characteristics of placement neighborhoods. Women who moved to racially mixed or predominantly white neighborhoods with higher levels of socioeconomic resources did slightly better than their counterparts in areas with low resources and high levels of black residents (Mendenhall, DeLuca, and Duncan 2006). Research on the children of the original Gautreaux families has demonstrated that the neighborhoods where they resided in the late 1990s were substantially more integrated than their overwhelmingly minority origin neighborhoods (Keels 2007a). However, the effects of relocating to lower poverty, more integrated areas had a mixed effect on the delinquent behaviors and arrest rates of boys versus girls. Suburban boys were much less likely to become involved in the criminal justice system, while girls who moved to the suburbs were more likely to be convicted for criminal offenses (Keels 2007b).

How Did Gautreaux "Work"?

The findings described above focus on the advances made in recent quantitative work. We had employed techniques to approximate the assessment of Gautreaux as a "treatment"—a social intervention with effects we might measure with statistical corrections and design comparisons. However, the stories Gautreaux participants tell about their experiences can contribute greatly to our understanding. The long-term family outcomes we observed appear to be significantly linked to the mobility program and the characteristics of the placement neighborhoods. However, administrative data cannot tell us *how* these outcomes occurred, or the mechanisms through which neighborhoods have their impact. This is a problem common to neigh-

borhood research, and one that makes improving mobility programs especially difficult. However, in several qualitative studies (Rosenbaum, Reynolds, and DeLuca 2002; Rosenbaum, DeLuca, and Tuck 2005), we analyzed interviews with mothers who described how these neighborhoods helped improve their lives and the lives of their children. Was it a matter of just increasing access to better resources, or was it necessary to interact with neighbors to obtain the full benefit of these new resources?

We analyzed interviews with 150 Gautreaux mothers and found that after the move, they described a new sense of efficacy and control over their lives and that the major changes in their environments helped them to see that they had the ability to make improvements in their lives. Certain features of the new suburban neighborhoods changed their perception of what was possible. Specifically, the women reported that they felt better about having an address in the suburbs, and not having to put down a public housing address on job applications. Other women noted that by moving to areas with more white residents, they and their children got to know more white people, and racial stereotypes were debunked. One child whose only exposure to white people were those she saw on TV reported that after moving, she discovered that not all whites looked like TV actors.

Social interactions with whites allowed some of these women to feel that they had more social and cultural know-how and feel much less intimidated by future contexts in which they might have to interact with whites. Additionally, working through some of the initial difficulties of the transitions to the suburbs allowed these women to realize that they could handle manageable challenges along the way to better jobs and more schooling. In comparison, the drugs or gang violence in their old city neighborhoods seemed to be forces too big for them to control and therefore permanent impediments to the advancements they were trying to

make in their lives. These findings suggest to us that one's repertoire of capabilities can vary depending on the type of neighborhood one lives and works in.

Many of the mothers we interviewed also noted that they had to change their way of behaving to comply with the social norms of the new neighborhoods. Several women noted initial difficulties in adjusting to suburban norms, which were unfamiliar and intolerant of some of their prior behaviors. These mothers, who have lived all their lives in housing projects where these norms did not exist, saw benefits to complying with these expectations, and they decided to adopt them. Ironically, some of these normative constraints, such as low tolerance for drugs and parties, were liberating because the trade-off was community safety. This meant that mothers did not have to spend all their time watching their children, and these norms allowed mothers to give their children more freedom.

Similarly, mothers reported social responsiveness from their neighbors. They received the benefits of reciprocal relations related to child care, and neighbors' watchfulness promoted the safety of their children, their property, and themselves. They were also given favors in terms of transportation and some acts of charity. It is remarkable that these new residents, who generally differed in race and class from their neighbors, were awarded this collective generosity, and the interviews suggest that it may have been conditional on their showing a willingness to abide by community norms.

Most important, the new suburban social contexts provided a form of capital that enhanced people's capabilities. Some mothers reported that they could count on neighbors if their child misbehaved or seemed at risk of getting into trouble, if their child was sick and couldn't attend school, or if there was some threat to their children, apartments, or themselves. This was not just interpersonal support, it was systemic, and enabled these mothers to take actions and make commit-

ments that otherwise would be difficult or risky. For instance, some mothers reported a willingness to take jobs because they could count on a neighbor to watch their child in case they were late getting home from work. It is through some of these mechanisms—some social, some psychological—that we believe the Gautreaux families were able to permanently escape the contexts and consequences of segregated poverty and unsafe inner-city neighborhoods.

More recent interviews with Gautreaux mothers suggest that some aspects of the city-suburban divide were also important for shaping how the placement community affected their children's behavior (Keels 2007b; Mendenhall 2004). City movers placed in both moderate- and low-poverty neighborhoods found that although their immediate neighborhood was safe, the larger community to which their children had easy access continued to be dangerous. In comparison, children placed in the suburbs had less direct neighborhood exposure to drugs and illegal activities and attended higher-performing public schools with greater financial and teacher resources. Interviews revealed that affluent suburban neighborhoods also had substantially fewer opportunities for involvement in delinquent criminal activities and gangs.

Was Gautreaux a Social Experiment?

Methodologically, we often rely on observational data and regression analyses to provide estimates of the "effect" of neighborhood contexts and interventions. These approaches have their weaknesses; it is complicated, if not impossible to infer causal effects when we know that there are unobservable characteristics of families that lead not only to their selection of neighborhood, but also to the outcomes of interest. As a result, there has been an increased push to employ experimental designs to control for and assign social and economic "treatments," be they neighborhoods, school programs, or income subsidies.

Along these lines, the Gautreaux program resembled a quasi-experiment. Although the program was not designed as an experiment and families were not formally randomly assigned to conditions, aspects of the program administration break the link between family preferences and neighborhood placement. In principle, participants had choices about where they moved. In practice, qualifying rental units were secured by rental agents working for the Gautreaux program and offered to families according to their position on a waiting list, regardless of their locational preference. Although participants could refuse an offer, few did so, since they were unlikely to ever get another.² As a result, participants' preferences for placement neighborhoods had relatively little to do with where they ended up moving, providing a degree of exogenous variability in neighborhood placement that undergirds Gautreaux research. Few significant differences were found between suburban and city movers' individual characteristics, but premove neighborhood attributes show small, but statistically significant differences on two of nine comparisons. This may indicate selection bias, although random assignment studies by the HUD-sponsored Moving to Opportunity (MTO) also find some substantial differences (Goering and Feins 2003, Table 7.1). It is not clear whether the observed premove differences explain much of the outcome difference. For instance, while suburban movers came from *slightly* lower-poverty tracts than city movers (poverty rate of 40.6 percent vs. 43.8 percent), they moved to census tracts with *dramatically* lower poverty rates (5.0 percent vs. 27.3 percent; DeLuca and Rosenbaum 2003). While small (3 percentage points) differences in initial neighborhoods may account for a portion of the outcome differences, it is hard to dismiss the possible influence of the vast differences in placement neighborhoods. Current papers have discussed these issues at length and examine multiple neighborhood level indicators, detailed pre-

program neighborhood differences, and intergenerational effects (DeLuca and Rosenbaum 2003; Keels et al. 2005; Mendenhall, DeLuca, and Duncan 2006; DeLuca et al. forthcoming; Keels 2007a and 2007b).

In contrast, MTO was an experiment, with the random assignment of low-income families to three conditions—an experimental group (who moved to low-poverty census tracts), an open-choice Housing Voucher group, and a “no move” control group. MTO was developed to formally test the Gautreaux findings, with more rigorous design, and pre/post move data collection. Unfortunately, while MTO was a stronger study, it was a weaker “neighborhood change treatment” in some respects. The Gautreaux program moved families an average of 25 miles away from their original neighborhood, to radically different labor markets, where nearly all children attended schools with above-average achievement and were too far away to interact with prior friends. In comparison, most MTO families moved less than 10 miles away in mostly city neighborhoods, most children attended schools with very low achievement, and many children continued interacting with old friends. In addition, MTO occurred in the hot labor market of the late 1990s, and large numbers of families in the control group moved out of high-rise housing projects through the federal HOPE VI program, so the control group was experiencing unusual benefits and atypical circumstances which may not generalize to more ordinary times.

While early Gautreaux analyses showed that suburban children attended much better schools and enjoyed improvements in educational outcomes relative to the city movers, the MTO program did not have such an effect on educational outcomes. Compared to the control group, the MTO treatment group showed no difference in test scores, school dropout, or self-reported measures of school engagement four to seven years after random assignment (Sanbonmatsu et al. 2006). This was due in part to the fact that

many MTO experimental families sent their children to schools in the same school district (often the same schools), and even when they changed schools, the new schools were not much better than the original schools.

While Gautreaux was associated with gains in mothers' employment, the MTO treatment group showed no impact compared with the control group—both groups showed large gains of comparable magnitude. However, MTO outcomes were measured in the late 1990s, during a strong labor market and strong welfare reform, so, although MTO found no difference between groups, it found a 100 percent employment gain for the control group. One possible interpretation is that virtually everyone who could work was doing so, and residential moves had no additional effect for that reason.

Both Gautreaux and MTO also found large effects on mothers' and children's feelings of safety. Despite the shorter moves and less dramatic change in social environment, MTO also showed significant reductions in depression and obesity among mothers, and lower levels of anxiety, arrests, and substance use among daughters (but an increase in arrests for sons) (Kling, Liebman, and Katz 2007; Kling, Ludwig, and Katz 2005). Gautreaux studied neither of these outcomes.

When comparing the two programs, it is crucial to understand the nature of the comparisons that are being made. Although social scientists have been concerned with learning what are likely benefits of certain kinds of neighborhood moves, what policy makers need to know is how a family fares when policy offers them the opportunity to move to a lower-poverty or less segregated neighborhood, relative to what would have happened to that family had it not been given that opportunity. Gautreaux research studies can only compare subgroups of families that moved in conjunction with the program and experienced variation in neighborhood contexts—there is no comparison group of similar families who did not move as part of the

program. MTO's evaluation design is much stronger since it tracked the fortunes of a randomly assigned control group of families who expressed interest in the program but, owing to the luck of the draw, were not assigned to the move (although some managed to move on their own). At the same time, however, the program-driven assignment procedures of Gautreaux can inform us about what happens when families move long distances to radically different neighborhoods, moves which changed their social context in many ways—new neighborhoods were more racially integrated and less poor, and the communities had higher levels of school quality, labor market strength, and safety. While both studies indicate how powerful the effects of residential moves can be for some families, the differences in findings indicates the importance of program design features, historical context influences and concurrent policy effects. For example, alternative forms of mobility, such as those under the involuntary conditions of HOPE VI, may have different results.

Many policy reforms have tried to improve individuals' education or employability while they remain in the same poor schools or labor markets, but these reforms have often failed. Such policies may be fighting an uphill battle as long as families remain in the same social contexts and opportunity structures. In contrast, Gautreaux findings suggest that housing policy is one possible lever to assist poor families, by moving them into much better neighborhoods, with much better schools and labor markets. The initial gains in neighborhood quality that many of the Gautreaux families achieved persisted for at least one to two decades. The Gautreaux findings suggest that it is possible for low-income black families to make permanent escapes from neighborhoods with concentrated racial segregation, crime, and poverty, and that these moves are associated with significant gains in education, employment, and racially integrated friendships, particularly for children. However, as the MTO findings

suggest, there is much that we still need to learn about what kinds of moves are required to make major changes in outcomes, and like MTO, strong research designs will be needed to remove alternative interpretations.

NOTES

1. The collection and preparation of the data used for the more recent studies executed from 2000–2005 were done as a collaborative effort involving: Stefanie DeLuca, Greg J. Duncan, James E. Rosenbaum, Ruby Mendenhall, and Micere Keels. Various authors collaborated on each study, as cited in the references.

2. Although only about 20 percent of the eligible applicants ended up moving through the program, self-selection does not appear to have played a big role in program take-up (Peterson and Williams 1995). Rather than opting out of the program, most nonmoving families were not offered a housing unit and thus not given the chance to participate. Housing counselors were forbidden by the consent decree from making offers selectively among eligible families, and there is no evidence that they did so.

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