

Constrained Compliance: Solving the Puzzle of MTO's Lease-Up Rates and Why Mobility Matters

Kathryn Edin
Harvard University

Stefanie DeLuca
Johns Hopkins University

Ann Owens
Harvard University

Abstract

The Moving to Opportunity (MTO) for Fair Housing demonstration provided an opportunity for low-income renters to move to low-poverty neighborhoods. Many of these renters, however, did not move with their vouchers, and many of those who moved did not stay in low-poverty neighborhoods. In this article, we explore the mechanisms behind these residential outcomes and what they mean for housing policy. First, we review evidence suggesting that MTO families wanted to live in low-poverty “opportunity areas.” We then describe how some aspects of the Housing Choice Voucher Program, the structural features of the housing market, and the beliefs and coping mechanisms of low-income renters—shaped by years of living in extreme poverty—prevented these families from achieving their goals of residential mobility. Finally, we consider the negative consequences on the life chances of the poor if housing policy does not address constraints to mobility and identify potential policy solutions that might lead to opportunities for low-income renters to live in low-poverty neighborhoods.

Introduction

Across the nation, the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) for Fair Housing demonstration has raised a chorus of “why didn’t” responses (for example, see Briggs, Popkin, and Goering, 2010; Sampson, 2012). The loudest question (Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2011; Clampet-Lundquist and Massey, 2008; Ludwig et al., 2008; Sampson, 2008; Turney et al., 2006) has commanded most of the attention: Why didn’t MTO have *more* of an effect? Some researchers (Goetz and Chapple, 2010; Imbroscio, 2012) have even claimed that MTO shows that assisted housing mobility programs do not improve life chances. Two more specific questions point more directly to how well the program really worked, however: Why did more people not move with their vouchers, and why did more people not stay longer in their low-poverty neighborhoods?

To these questions, one might reasonably add another: why do we need a program like MTO, which circumscribes where people can lease up, when renters can exercise choice and live where they want via the traditional Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP)? The answer to this question, in a nutshell, is the rationale for MTO: without restricting the voucher so initial lease ups occurred in low-poverty neighborhoods, MTO’s architects feared that the public housing residents the program sought to serve—who were largely African American or from other disadvantaged minority groups—would not make a move to such neighborhoods on their own. They were right about this concern; perhaps one of the most startling outcomes of MTO is that families in the Section 8 group, who were offered a traditional HCVP voucher rather than the restricted low-poverty voucher offered to families in the experimental group, spent a median of only 9 months in lower poverty neighborhoods (less than 20 percent poor) over the 10- to 12-year window of the study. In contrast, MTO succeeded in helping families in the experimental group spend a median of 36 months in such neighborhoods (the figures for *compliers* in the Section 8 and experimental groups were 24 and 87 months, respectively)—perhaps not as much time as many had hoped, but not an insignificant amount.

Because the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was generous enough to allow several qualitative research teams into the field along with the survey researchers, we know a lot about the reasons why families in the two treatment groups might not have made or maintained larger gains in neighborhood quality. These reasons teach us a lot about the very problem MTO was trying to solve: how to get voucher holders into lower poverty neighborhoods with more resources. As we show in this article, this body of research defies the conventional wisdom, which assumes that families did not lease up or stay in opportunity neighborhoods because they did not want to—that they instead preferred a set of neighbors who were more like them. The qualitative research conducted on MTO, other mobility programs, and the voucher population more generally, disputes this simplistic assumption. As we show in the following sections, the opposite was often the case: families who moved with a voucher were often overjoyed by their new neighborhood environments and experienced considerable relief upon leaving high-poverty neighborhoods behind. Over time, however, profound structural and cultural forces shaped families’ residential trajectories to diminish the contrast between families in the experimental group and those in the control group.

In 2003 and 2004, just after the MTO followup survey for the interim impacts evaluation (Orr et al., 2003), our team entered the field in Baltimore and Chicago to study MTO adults and youth, using indepth qualitative interviews and neighborhood and classroom observations. We spent time in nearly all of the origin neighborhoods from which the MTO families hailed and many of the neighborhoods to which they moved with the voucher and in which they had ended up by the time we contacted them, 7 to 9 years after random assignment. We conducted another round of intensive qualitative work in 2010 and 2011, after the long-term survey for the final impacts evaluation (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011). In both rounds, we spoke at length with hundreds of MTO participants, both adults and teens, about their experiences in their origin, placement, and subsequent neighborhoods and the process through which they ended up where they were. Other MTO qualitative teams undertook similar studies in the other three MTO cities: Boston, Los Angeles, and New York City (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering, 2010). These data, along with recent qualitative studies of the residential trajectories of families in other mobility programs and in the traditional Section 8 voucher program, offer powerful lessons about three factors that shape the residential trajectories of poor families: (1) the difficulty of using the voucher to navigate the private housing market in cities highly segregated by income and race, (2) problems with the voucher program itself, and (3) the beliefs and coping strategies—factors that economists might subsume under the label *preferences*—of the families MTO sought to serve. We argue that these forces, taken together, were likely a main cause of depressed lease-up rates (especially for low-poverty voucher holders, but also for the Section 8 group) and of returns to poorer neighborhoods after initial opportunity moves.

Where MTO Families Wanted To Live

The conventional wisdom about why experimental group participants did not lease up or remain in what the MTO program called *opportunity areas* is that they wanted to live with others “like them” or in areas more like the neighborhoods they had moved from. Although some experimental group families might certainly have felt that way, the accounts from our interviews (and from the followup survey for the interim impacts evaluation) do not support this assertion. In fact, families often told us exactly the opposite. For most experimental group participants we interviewed, the contrast between public housing and their MTO placement neighborhoods was hardly lost on them (Turney, Kissane, and Edin, 2011).

Jacqueline said of her origin neighborhood,

I was living [in] what they call the danger zone. . . . You don't know how bad I wanted to get out of that place. . . . There was shooting and all that. By me living on the corner, all the junkies and all hung right on that corner.

Keisha, a participant in the experimental group, characterized her public housing neighborhood in this way: “It's like they got you in a cage. . . . You are in this hole, where all these people cramped in.”

Tammy, a participant in the control group, recounted her time in public housing as follows:

That was the worst experience that I ever experienced, living in an environment which made you feel trapped, caged, and worthless—just stuck into the atmosphere of absolutely no progress. It was a whole little community of pure dissatisfaction. . . . No one encouraged no one.

These examples are in striking contrast to the way many movers in the experimental group described their new environments to Turney, Kissane, and Edin (2011).

Niecy said she could see grass, birds, and squirrels out the window of her new apartment; she felt she “had moved from night to day.”

Amy said the change in the neighborhood’s physical environment had dramatically improved her outlook on life:

You living in a high-rise, you got a lot [of] cement. And there’s something to that effect in the psychology . . . , the hardness you get from all that concrete. The greenery [here], it softens you. It’s just so beautiful and peaceful, the space, the open space.

Peaches’ account about her new place demonstrates how transformative a new unit in a better neighborhood can be:

Oh God, when I first moved in . . . everything was just so neat, clean, and well kept and quiet and peaceful, I was like ‘Thank you God. This is what I have been waiting for,’ you know? And when I first moved in the house, I just cried. I just really cried. I was like ‘Oh my God . . . Now I can raise my family in the way I want to raise them,’ you know?

A Baltimore mover in the experimental group told us that her daughter’s asthma disappeared after the MTO move away from the projects in West Baltimore. Some parents who made it to Howard County, Maryland—which has some of the highest performing schools in the area—were impressed with how much attention their children received in school and how their children’s behaviors changed as they were exposed to new peers (DeLuca and Rosenblatt, 2010). Drawing from the followup survey for the interim evaluation and the various qualitative studies of MTO, we know of no evidence to suggest that experimental group families did not lease up or stay in opportunity areas because they wanted to live among fewer middle-class or White neighbors (Briggs, Popkin and Goering, 2010; Rosenblatt and DeLuca, forthcoming).

Problems With the Voucher Program and Private Markets in Segregated Cities

MTO’s design was based on the best research available at the time. Concentrated poverty is associated with any number of deleterious outcomes for families and children, and the idea of giving families in some of the most highly distressed public housing in the country a chance to move to a low-poverty neighborhood made perfect sense. MTO did not occur in a vacuum, however; rather, a modified version of the Section 8 voucher program, a program that has limitations of its own, launched families on housing searches in metropolitan areas with significant structural barriers to residential mobility. Although MTO offered experimental group members modest counseling to help navigate housing markets (Feins, McInnis, and Popkin, 1997), MTO’s architects may have underestimated how weaknesses in the Section 8 voucher program and the power of highly segregated city housing markets would impede the movement of low-income families out of high-poverty neighborhoods. Over time, these same forces also served to bounce opportunity movers out of low-poverty neighborhoods and into neighborhoods that were similar to those of their counterparts in the control group.

Baltimore and Chicago, two of the MTO sites, serve as good examples. In Baltimore, a crisis of available affordable housing arose in the metropolitan area just at the time when low-poverty and traditional Section 8 voucher holders were trying to lease up. The rental market was very tight, and few units with more than three bedrooms were available. Families were subject to all the choice-limiting aspects of the traditional Section 8 voucher program. For example, MTO did not provide relief for the burdensome portability procedures that would have more easily enabled movers in the experimental group to use their vouchers outside the Housing Authority of Baltimore City's (HABC's) jurisdiction. In Baltimore, landlords may have been hesitant to participate because the administrator of the larger voucher program, HABC, had become notorious for late payments and inspection delays. In addition, Baltimore and most of its adjacent counties did not have source-of-income protection that could have prevented landlords from refusing to lease to voucher holders.¹ As in other cities, Fair Market Rent (FMR) levels were tagged to the 40th percentile of the metropolitan area median rent, not to the median rent of a smaller geographic unit, and thus were much less than the median rents in many mostly White and affluent areas in the city and suburbs, further restricting the scope of possible units to which families could move.

Chicago's Cook County, which encompasses Chicago and some of its inner suburbs, does have source-of-income protection, but that did not eliminate all the barriers to lease up there (and the protection does not apply outside of Cook County). Navigating the private housing market was still enormously difficult for voucher holders. In 2002, a 3-year longitudinal study of roughly 100 participants in a new wave of Chicago's Gautreaux program (Gautreaux Two) recruited families at the first orientation session so researchers could observe the process of lease up. Virtually every client wanted to leave public housing behind, but many struggled mightily to secure a unit within program guidelines. Families often visited dozens of units over several months that subsequently failed to qualify, either because they were not in census tracts that met program rules or because they did not pass Section 8 inspection. In the tight housing market of that time, larger families had a particularly hard time leasing up within the prescribed time limit, as did families headed by an adult who was working full time or was both working and going to school. For these busy families, the time and energy involved in mounting a housing search in opportunity neighborhoods, with which they may have had limited familiarity, were simply too much, even with the modest counseling the program provided. Similarly, families with physical or mental health problems also often found the process too onerous (Pashup et al., 2005).

In both MTO and Gautreaux Two, families often moved on from their placement neighborhoods after 1 year, when the voucher became portable, often moving to higher poverty neighborhoods. Retrospective interviews of adults in Baltimore (Rosenblatt and DeLuca, forthcoming) and in Los Angeles, Boston, and New York (Briggs, Comey, and Weisman, 2010; Briggs, Popkin, and Goering, 2010) suggest that unit and landlord problems—everything from units failing their annual inspection to landlords raising the rent to greater than the FMR or failing to respond to a major maintenance problem—played leading roles in prompting these subsequent moves. This finding

¹ The Public Justice Center in Baltimore contacted 42 apartment complexes located in areas of adjacent Baltimore County that have few voucher holders. In 34 of the 42 complexes, amounting to 12,000 total units, property managers reported that they did not accept vouchers. Some of the same owners, however, do accept vouchers in complexes located in predominantly African-American or lower income neighborhoods (Samuels, 2012).

is consistent with the prospective research on the experiences of families who moved through Gautreaux Two; one-half moved at the 1-year point, with unit and landlord problems cited as the leading reasons prompting the moves. Fieldworkers often witnessed these unit problems first hand—leaking roofs, ill-fitting windows that let in moisture and cold, broken plumbing or heating systems, and rodent infestation— as well as conflicts with landlords (Boyd et al., 2010).

In particular, the unit problems were often quite severe, suggesting that, when used in a neighborhood that qualified as an opportunity area, the voucher often afforded a family units and landlords at the very low end of the quality scale. Wood's (2011) indepth interviews with African-American participants in Baltimore's Section 8 voucher program showed that voucher holders were very sensitive to the fact that poorer neighborhoods with lower rents often offer more "bang" in terms of unit quality and size for the voucher "buck" than less poor, less African-American neighborhoods. DeLuca, Wood, and Rosenblatt (2011), who studied African-American voucher holders in Baltimore and Mobile, Alabama, found that the program limitations on time to lease up (in general, 60 days) conditioned families' choices when moving. When units failed physical inspection, or when landlords failed to respond to maintenance requests or raised the rent, families under pressure often took the first or second unit they looked at, afraid they would lose their voucher or even end up homeless. These dynamics led them to move to mostly poor and racially segregated neighborhoods, where qualifying units are more plentiful and landlords are typically more eager to take a voucher.

World Views and Preferences

The MTO program left families to choose their own units and neighborhoods as long as they met the criteria of being located in a census tract that was less than 10 percent poor. After 1 year, the low-poverty voucher became fully portable; it could be used in any neighborhood. MTO's design, however, was predicated on the idea that the housing authority could not leave mobility decisions up to choice alone—at least not at the outset—because participants would be unlikely to move to an opportunity area on their own. To this end, each site engaged in some level of housing counseling to aid clients as they tried to lease up in low-poverty neighborhoods, but no ongoing counseling was available to help families stay in these neighborhoods when a unit failed annual inspection, the landlord raised the rent or was unnecessarily intrusive, or broken pipes spilled sewage into the basement (a condition we observed more than once).

Over and above the considerable structural barriers outlined previously, a surprising set of preferences governed these subsequent moves—preferences honed over years of living in distressed public housing located in some of America's poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods. Again, these preferences were not what readers might think: both our interviews, mentioned previously, and the followup survey for the interim impacts evaluation showed that families seldom left low-poverty neighborhoods because they found such communities uncomfortable or disliked the economic mix or racial diversity there (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering, 2010; Rosenblatt and DeLuca, forthcoming). To the contrary, in other mobility programs such as Gautreaux Two, movers often spontaneously cited race and class diversity as something they enjoyed and were reluctant to leave behind (Boyd et al., 2010). Nor was the desire to live near kin always, or even often, a major factor; in fact, sometimes people wanted to get away from the "needy" ties of their families (Boyd et al., 2010;

Briggs, Popkin, and Goering, 2010; Rosenblatt and DeLuca, forthcoming). Wood's (2011) sample of Baltimore low-income renters, including voucher holders, held strong notions of what constitutes a suitable place to raise children: a private entrance to increase safety, a multilevel unit to manage noise and ensure a quiet place for children to sleep and do schoolwork, a basement for extra room and to house older (especially male) children who may be a deleterious influence on younger children, and a fenced-in back yard so children could play safely outdoors without extensive monitoring. These unit considerations usually trumped neighborhood and school considerations. Retrospective interviews from MTO movers reflected some of the same themes (Rosenblatt and DeLuca, forthcoming).

DeLuca, Wood, and Rosenblatt (2011) and Rosenblatt and DeLuca (forthcoming) detailed the psychological and practical coping mechanisms that shape such residential decisions among voucher holders. On the psychological side, respondents who moved on to high-poverty neighborhoods often engaged in *telescoping*—defining the neighborhood as the block face and seeking visual evidence that the unit was at least on a good block, regardless of the surrounding neighborhood's quality—and typically adopted the belief that the quality of the unit was more important for family well-being and child development than neighborhood surrounds (“we live in here, we don't live out there”). On the practical side, they “kept to themselves”—avoiding contact with neighbors who might bring trouble and restricting the children to playing indoors, strategies that proved less effective for teens than for younger children. In short, their expectations about the quality of their neighborhoods were often quite low, and they believed that by keeping to themselves, they could ensure their children's well-being.

Similarly limited expectations for their children's schools were also pervasive in the interviews with parents in the experimental group who moved on; many mothers told us they believed that good schools were those that required uniforms and had security guards (qualities that made perfect sense in the chaotic schools we visited in the course of our research). Other parents told us that the school environment was irrelevant and that their children's efforts were a more important determinant of their academic success. After their own experiences coming up in low-performing urban schools, these parents believed that their children could make their own way, just like they could survive unsafe neighborhoods (DeLuca and Rosenblatt, 2010).

When combined with the structural difficulties of obtaining affordable housing in opportunity areas, these strong beliefs about ideal home environments for raising children, along with a powerful set of adaptive coping skills that reduced expectations about what constituted suitable neighborhoods and schools, were probably strong enough forces to draw families in the experimental group back into higher poverty neighborhoods over time. These forces also likely kept those families in the Section 8 group and those in the control group who left public housing via a voucher from using the vouchers to move to very low-poverty neighborhoods.

Previously, we used the word *preferences* to describe these beliefs and coping strategies. This terminology, however, oversimplifies the process and implies freedom of choice. Instead, the preferences this body of qualitative work has revealed have been honed by years of enduring discrimination and significant neighborhood adversity. To make our point, we turn to the way courts perceived “freedom-of-choice” plans after *Brown v. Board of Education*. In a subsequent case in 1968, *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, the court struck down freedom-of-choice plans because

they placed too much of the burden of integration on the families, many of whom were too intimidated to choose the White schools in the county. Other legal scholarship refers to the idea of *tainted choice*—choices that are restricted because of previous discrimination (Gewirtz, 1986). In the case of MTO, many families—at least in Baltimore and Chicago, where participants were almost entirely African American—had been living for generations in neighborhoods that were heavily segregated (often by design). In the face of more information and a more diverse range of previous experiences, their preferences might have been different. Indeed, the Gautreaux Two study showed that families who had recent experience living outside of public housing were more likely to persist in opportunity areas (Boyd et al., 2010), and studies of Chicago’s original Gautreaux program found that families reported more positive assessments of low-poverty White neighborhoods after having lived there (Rosenbaum, DeLuca, and Tuck, 2005). One experimental group mover told us—

If I had not had that opportunity to go into the MTO program, I would not have known what it would have been like to live in a house in a positive environment—to see how middle class people live.... It just made me want that. (DeLuca and Rosenblatt, 2010: 1468)

Sticking to the Status Quo?

What happens if families do not have an opportunity to experience lower poverty, less segregated, safer communities? Children’s educational outcomes provide a good example. Recent observational studies suggest that neighborhood context can have profound effects on the cognitive development of young children. Burdick-Will et al. (2011) noted that, despite a lack of educational effects for the five-city study, experimental group families’ neighborhood changes in Baltimore and Chicago did improve children’s reading scores. In a nonexperimental study, Sampson, Sharkey, and Raudenbush (2008) compared the verbal cognitive ability of African-American children living in Chicago neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage to that of African-American children with nearly identical individual characteristics and family backgrounds who live in Chicago neighborhoods with higher socioeconomic status. They found that living in a neighborhood of concentrated disadvantage reduces the verbal cognitive score of African-American children by 4 points, the equivalent of missing 1 year of schooling. They also found that this effect develops over time, emphasizing the durable role of neighborhoods in children’s early development. Wodtke, Harding, and Elwert (2011) also showed that negative effects of living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty accrue over time and that sustained exposure can have devastating effects on the odds of graduating from high school.

Burdick-Will et al. (2011) identified two explanations for why some recent observational studies found more consistent evidence that neighborhoods matter for educational outcomes, whereas MTO found only limited evidence from two sites. First, it seems that changing a child’s neighborhood context matters more for children in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods. Second, and most striking, exposure to violence helps explain achievement differences across neighborhoods (see also Sharkey, 2010). Families in the experimental group in the Chicago and Baltimore sites left neighborhoods that were both more disadvantaged and more violent at baseline than at other sites, and as a result, their children benefited in school after these moves.

Neighborhoods of concentrated poverty negatively shape children's outcomes, such as education, and the fact that these dynamics stand the test of time, across generations, is even more remarkable. Sharkey (2008) found that children who grow up in very poor neighborhoods live in similar neighborhoods as adults, and the cumulative neighborhood contexts of multiple generations can affect children's outcomes. Sharkey and Elwert (2011) found that the neighborhood contexts in which parents grew up have a nearly equal effect on children's cognitive abilities as that of the children's own neighborhood contexts. These findings suggest that the stakes of changing a family's neighborhood are high; neighborhood contexts matter not only for parents and children, but for the children's children as well. Research shows that these dynamics are especially acute for African-American children, whose parents are much less likely to move to a low-poverty neighborhood via a voucher than their White counterparts, as we describe in the following section.

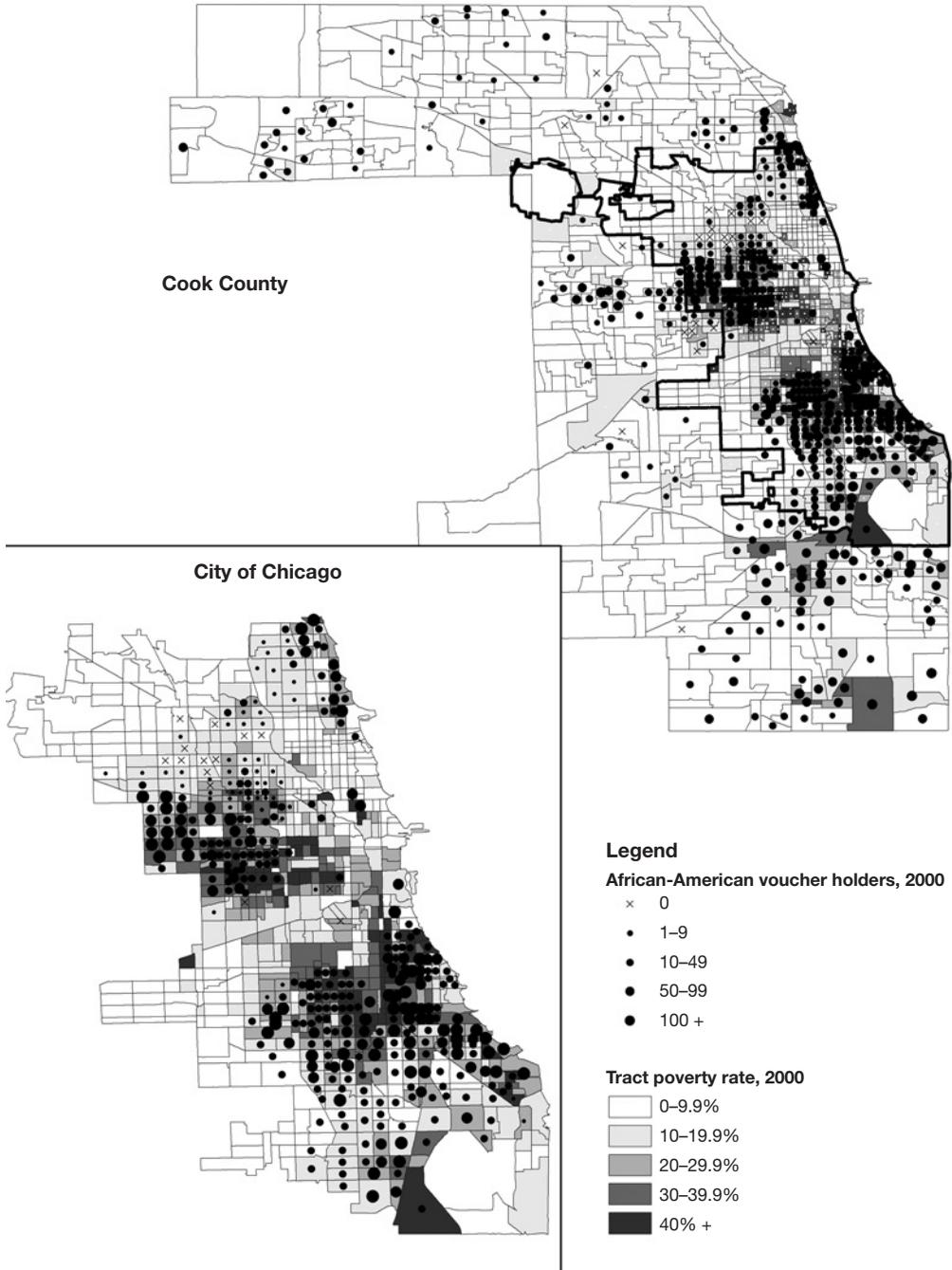
The Cost of Doing Nothing

In sum, despite MTO's substantial early success—MTO managed to move one-half of the families in the experimental group to very low-poverty neighborhoods—a wide array of problematic program features and structural forces of highly segregated housing markets, together with underlying beliefs and coping strategies predicated on years of living in highly distressed neighborhoods, may have spelled disaster for the longer term neighborhood attainment of participants in the two treatment groups. These dynamics limited choice so as to funnel families in the experimental group into higher poverty neighborhoods over time. The behavior of families in the Section 8 group—who at median spent *not a single month* in a very low-poverty neighborhood (less than 10 percent poor) and only 9 months in a neighborhood that was less than 20 percent poor over the duration of the study—is further testament to this constrained choice. Evidence from the larger HCVP suggests that the dynamics affecting low-poverty and traditional voucher holders, who are largely African American or another minority, may be felt among African-American voucher holders nationally—they seldom lease up in neighborhoods with lower poverty rates, despite the fact that, given the voucher, they can theoretically afford to do so (Devine et al., 2003). These trends are part of what motivated MTO in the first place. In the absence of mobility programs, minority voucher holders rarely manage to leverage the subsidy to access neighborhoods of opportunity, leaving them uniquely disadvantaged by the program (DeLuca, Garboden, and Rosenblatt, forthcoming).

Exhibit 1 shows this striking pattern for the Chicago voucher program. In Cook County in 2000, 36 percent of African-American voucher holders lived in neighborhoods with poverty rates of more than 30 percent, and more than 60 percent lived in tracts where at least 20 percent of the residents were poor. Within Chicago city limits, these figures are even higher: nearly 50 percent of African-American voucher holders lived in neighborhoods with poverty rates of more than 30 percent and more than 75 percent lived in neighborhoods with poverty rates of more than 20 percent. Residential racial segregation among voucher holders is also extremely high. Nearly two-thirds of African-American voucher holders lived in neighborhoods composed of 90 percent or more African-American residents; conversely, nearly two-thirds of White voucher holders lived in areas with less than 10 percent African-American residents. None of these figures have improved over time: a slightly higher proportion of African-American voucher holders were concentrated in poor, minority-dominated neighborhoods by 2008 (authors' own calculations based on HUD, 2008, 2000, and on 2000 census and 2005–2009 American Community Survey data).

Exhibit 1

Distribution of African-American Voucher Holders by Neighborhood Poverty Rates, Chicago and Cook County, Illinois, 2000



Note: Tracts with no symbol have fewer than 11 total vouchers; thus, data on the racial composition of voucher holders are not available.

Sources: HUD (2000); Neighborhood Change Database

HUD is currently at a crossroads; given the results of MTO, should it fund or reward public housing authorities for engaging in mobility programs? Although most of the HUD budget goes toward tenant-based rental assistance in the form of housing vouchers, the HCVP alone does not facilitate mobility to low-poverty neighborhoods. Currently, a number of HUD's new initiatives (for example, Choice Neighborhoods) are devoted to the opposite philosophy—to infuse poor communities with more resources through redevelopment, services, and subsidies; virtually no new efforts explicitly encourage the kind of assisted mobility that poor families need to access less poor, more integrated communities with better schools. We know of no hard evidence, however, that these in-place strategies actually work to improve family and child outcomes. Meanwhile, significant circumstantial evidence from quasi-experimental research (reported previously) and from the reanalysis of data on educational attainment among children in the Chicago and Baltimore MTO sites (Burdick-Will et al., 2011) suggests that continuing to subsidize units in high-poverty, low-resource neighborhoods with federal housing dollars could do children long-term, serious harm. Because African-American voucher holders are especially subject to these forces, African-American children may be especially harmed. The previously described research, and both quantitative and qualitative analyses of MTO, point to mental and physical health impairments that both youth and adults suffer when trapped in violent, high-poverty neighborhoods (see Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011; Turney, Kissane, and Edin, 2011), findings that speak volumes about the level of the damage such neighborhoods can wield. This situation introduces a puzzle: why are policymakers now more willing to back community development, which has virtually no empirical track record of improving family life, than mobility programs, which have moved the needle on several important outcomes? Should we not at least include mobility approaches in the package of resources poor renters can access?

The first rule of policy ought to be to do no harm. Paying the rent on a unit in a neighborhood with toxic rates of violence, deplorable schools, and weak institutional resources is simply a poor use of federal dollars in our view, when results from MTO and other programs, such as the original Gautreaux, show us that it is possible to get voucher holders to move to, and even stay in, better neighborhoods (DeLuca and Rosenbaum, 2003; Keels et al., 2005). HUD has any number of tools at hand to accomplish this goal: mobility counseling that eases access to lower poverty neighborhoods; smaller area FMRs that can eliminate the bang for the buck problem Wood (2011) identified among low-income renters, including voucher holders; streamlining portability procedures; and pushing for source-of-income protection in more metropolitan areas. The government may not be able to save every family from the potential harms of high-poverty neighborhoods, but it can at least make sure that government programs are not putting people in harm's way. While we wait for proven, in-place strategies, HUD should support local housing authorities in ways that ensure that mobility is a central goal.

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Authors

Kathryn Edin is a professor of public policy and management in the Harvard Kennedy School at Harvard University.

Stefanie DeLuca is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University.

Ann Owens is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology and social policy at Harvard University.

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