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Three-City Study
of Moving
to Opportunity

Do Better Neighborhoods for MTO Families Mean Better Schools?

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For roughly half a century, policymakers and researchers have debated the impacts of place, and in particular of inner-city neighborhoods, on employment, education, and mental and physical health. Research on programs that help people move to better neighborhoods has suggested that such programs can improve the life chances of low-income, mostly minority adults and, in particular, their children. One important way children might benefit is by having access to better schools.

MTO failed to provide participants with real access to high-performing schools.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched the Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing Demonstration (MTO) in 1994 in five cities—Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York (see text box on page 11)—to try to improve the life chances of very poor families by helping them leave the disadvantaged environments that contribute to poor outcomes in education and employment. The demonstration targeted families living in some of the nation's poorest, highest-crime communities—distressed public housing—and used housing subsidies to offer them a chance to move to lower-poverty neighborhoods. The hope was that moving would provide these families with access to better schools, city services—police, parks, libraries, sanitation—and economic opportunities. Participation in MTO was voluntary. Those who volunteered were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups: a control group, a Section 8 comparison group, or an experimental group (see page 11 for description of groups).

MTO focused on moving families into better neighborhoods and was not specifically targeted at improving educational outcomes. However, based on the findings from a housing desegregation program called Gautreaux (Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum 2000), MTO program designers expected that if families moved to low-poverty communities, children *could* have access to better, more resource-rich schools with more advantaged peers, and that this access might lead to the children working harder and achieving more (Kaufman and Rosenbaum 1992). On the other hand, children who moved to new neighborhoods and schools might respond negatively to competition from their more advantaged peers (Jencks and Mayer 1990; Rosenbaum 1995), or teachers might single out the newcomers for sanctions (Carter 2003; Skiba et al. 2000). MTO examined what happened.

Two early studies of families in the Baltimore and Boston sites one to three years after random assignment showed promising results for experimental movers, especially significant improvements in

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school quality (Katz, Kling, and Liebman 2003; Ladd and Ludwig 2003). In Baltimore, there was also evidence of positive impacts on reading and math scores. Follow-up research on the entire sample of MTO families at all five sites was conducted in 2002, about five years after the MTO families moved (Orr et al. 2003).

Confounding expectations, the results from the interim follow-up showed that children in the MTO experimental group were, in fact, doing no better academically than children in the other treatment groups. In addition, there were only limited improvements in school quality across the five sites. Experimental-group children were attending schools that were only slightly better than the control group on several common indicators of school quality, such as performance (as measured by their school's percentile rank on state exams), poverty rate, and exposure to white classmates and students with limited English proficiency. These findings have led researchers to conclude that MTO failed to provide experimental-group participants with real access to high-performing schools (Sanbonmatsu et al. forthcoming).[1] Without access to better schools, there is less reason to think that MTO might affect children's educational performance.

The mostly qualitative Three-City Study of MTO (see text box on page 11), a large-scale, mixed-method study, was designed to examine key puzzles raised by the interim evaluation, including the lack of effects on children's educational outcomes. The study combined qualitative interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and analysis of census and administrative data. It was conducted in three of the five MTO sites: Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. The interviews and ethnographic fieldwork took place in 2004 and 2005, 6 to 10 years after families' initial placement through the MTO program.[2]

In this brief, we use data from the Three-City Study to explore the factors that seem to have kept MTO experimental movers, who succeeded in moving to safer, less poor neighborhoods, from accessing better schools. Our analysis suggests both the potential and the limits of a relocation-only strategy to affect educational options and outcomes for disadvantaged children.

Why Didn't MTO Children End Up in Better Schools?

A major reason that MTO experimental-group children did not end up in better schools that might have improved their academic performance was that most—80 percent (and 70 percent of the subset who successfully moved)—stayed in the same school district. Children who did move outside their original district were more likely than those who stayed in the same district (20 percent versus 8 percent) to be attending a school in a different jurisdiction; this relative "locational success" varied significantly across MTO sites.[3] But even these other districts were typically the older "at-risk" suburbs, where poverty and pockets of racial segregation increased during the 1990s.

There is also evidence that school and district-level changes over the course of the experiment resulted in less variation in access to schools across the three treatment groups (Orr et al. 2003). Because of aggressive school reform in some cities, many control-group children were also in schools with higher test scores and were more likely to be in magnet schools than they were at baseline. Further, two-thirds of the control group had moved by the time of the interim evaluation, so some of those families may also have accessed better school districts.

In addition to these district-level factors, evidence from the Three-City Study of MTO suggests how parents and children chose which schools to attend may help explain why experimental children did not attend higher-quality schools or perform better academically than children in other treatment groups. Nationally, about three-quarters of children in public schools still attend "assigned" schools (Briggs 2005), and 71 percent of MTO children did so continuously from baseline to the interim point. Public school enrollment is generally determined by neighborhood or other attendance zones, making parents "nonchoosers" in the shorthand of educational research.

However, some MTO families did have meaningful school choices, such as charter schools, and citywide application systems for schools in Boston and New York. Our in-depth conversations revealed that even when families had these options, they were often "information poor," emphasized safety and order over academic standards, and, because of the complexity of their lives, had to balance a desire for better schools with issues of caregiving, work, and emotional and social stability.

MTO Families Were "Information Poor"

The majority of MTO parents sent their children to their assigned neighborhood schools, but among those who made school choice decisions, most were information poor. Only one in six parents we spoke to who had explicitly chosen a school for their children cited formal sources of information such as teachers or school staff. Just under half reported taking specific steps to find out which schools in their area were academically promising.

Information poverty did not vary across treatment groups in the Three-City MTO Study, suggesting that moving to a less-poor neighborhood did little to change access to information. In this respect, our findings echo the growing literature that indicates that most parents, especially low-income and minority parents, do not have formal assistance or counseling when they choose schools for their children (Bulman 2004).

Indeed, when MTO parents had school choices to make (and sometimes even when they officially did not), they relied heavily on referrals provided by their networks of relatives and friends. For the most part, these contacts were also relatively low-income people with limited education and knowledge of school options. For experimental movers, their new neighbors were cordial strangers or casual acquaintances at best, not sources of information or other aid. Not only did MTO parents not receive formal counseling, then, but as other studies have shown, these parents' social contacts were probably less "productive," in terms of information quality and referral, than the contacts of higher-income parents tend to be (Bell 2005).

For MTO families in all three treatment groups, relatives were especially important word-of-mouth resources. For example, Danielle[4] and her family were experimental-group movers who first moved to an inner suburb of Boston, then to another suburb, and then back to Boston's inner city. At this latest move, Danielle did not know much about the neighborhood schools, and her daughter Kia explained how her mother made her latest school choice, relying primarily on her cousin's assessment:

> Q: How did you decide which school to go to?
> A: I didn't decide. It was my cousin Allana, and my mom just said, she'll see if that school is good. If it's not good, she'll look into a different school.

Even when families had options, they were often information poor, emphasized safety, and had to balance competing demands.

Danielle made her school choice decision based not on formal information on school quality such as academic rank or graduation rate, but on what she learned from her social network. While we cannot know precisely what share of all MTO families these patterns represent, we found that most "choosers" in our sample relied on informal information sources to make their school choice decisions.

There were exceptions to the dominant patterns. For example, a very small number of parents in the experimental group moved successfully *and* were able to find out about higher-performing schools. These families typically learned about these schools through their close friends and family, not from neighbors in their new neighborhoods. Michelle, one such parent in the Boston experimental group, explained the choice to send her daughter to a stronger school, with enrollment by admissions exam, outside Boston:

> Q: How did she end up going there?
> A: My girlfriend is a schoolteacher, and her daughter was up at the high

> school . . . She told me the schools that she had applied to and she did plenty of research on the schools. So I didn't have to do much research because she already did it all for me.
>
> Q: Could she just sign up for the school, or was there any kind of lottery system for which children got to go there?
> A: Yeah, there are. There's a couple of categories. One, you have to be in Boston public school. And they go by your records, your grade records.
>
> Q: Oh, you have to do well in school to get in?
> A: Yes, she's an honor roll student.

In Boston and New York, where students are often given the option of selecting a theme high school, a few MTO parents were attracted by the name or theme of a school and made their choice on that basis. Our analysis shows, however, that this strategy did not reliably lead to high-quality schools. Jada's family had left the inner city for a safe, low-poverty neighborhood on Staten Island, where she attended an assigned neighborhood school. Jada was active at school, and her parents were obviously pleased at the education she was receiving. But now, faced for the first time with a school choice not dictated by their housing location, Jada's parents struggled with limited information on how to choose well.

Knowing that his daughter wanted to be a pediatrician, Jada's father supported her choice of the Academy of Health Careers high school. Our ethnographer observed as father and daughter went through a long list of schools provided by the New York City school district and selected that school based on the name indicating its focus, unaware—until our fieldworker pointed it out—that the school's graduation rate was just 40 percent.

In Boston, Shenice supported her daughter's Bianca's choice to attend Boston Tech Academy specifically because it guaranteed students the use of a laptop computer and the choice to keep it, for one dollar, upon graduation. Shenice had applied to the METCO program (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity), a voluntary desegregation program that buses academically promising children from inner-city communities to some of the highest-performing school districts in suburban Boston. But when her daughter was not admitted, Shenice did not push her to apply to a selective exam school in Boston, saying the prospect intimidated her daughter.

Shenice liked Boston Tech's focus on computers and considered it a sign of a "good" school. However, like Jada's father, Shenice was unaware that her daughters' school was one of Boston's underperforming, predominantly minority schools. Mother and daughter, who associated racial diversity and technology with school opportunity, were baffled when the school year began and they noticed that few white students attended Boston Tech.

Finally, information poverty seemed to be shaping the higher education choices of MTO children. We observed, and parental interviews confirmed, confusion about requirements, financial aid, and course options. It is unclear whether MTO children attending high schools in lower-poverty areas, or outside central-city districts, were getting more or better college counseling than counterparts enrolled in more disadvantaged areas.

Safety First—and Last?

At the follow-up in 2002, a majority of parents in all three MTO treatment groups—and 55 percent of the experimental group—cited safety concerns ("getting away from drugs, gangs") as the main reason they wanted to move. Just 16 percent cited "better schools for my children" as the top reason. Consistent with the emphasis on overall safety, about one-quarter of the MTO parents we interviewed for the Three-City Study cited safety and order as the key mark of a "good" school. Parents consistently said that safety and discipline—and the absence of violence or gang activity, in particular—were what made a school good or bad. Safety and order—especially low classroom disruption—are important indicators of school quality that directly affect learning. But avoiding a risky school does not ensure that parents will choose another one that offers the best academic opportunities. Among the choosers in the Three-City Study, one in seven appeared to make safety the overwhelming priority when assessing school quality, to the exclusion of any indicators of academic opportunity.

Three-City respondents from Los Angeles appeared somewhat more likely than those from Boston or New York to raise school safety concerns. Los Angeles was experiencing a surge of gang-related problems when we conducted our interviews in 2004, and this situation apparently affected respondents' views of their children's schools. Denise, a mother in the Los Angeles experimental group, talked about the differences between the "ghetto" school in her old neighborhood and the school her children attended after the family moved:

> Q: But you said part of the reason you moved was to get into better schools . . . How do you think it compares to the other schools . . . like in [the neighborhood where you used to live in public housing before MTO]?
> A: Oh, you can forget about in [the old neighborhood]. Those schools were, I don't know, just living in the ghetto basically.
>
> Q: So tell me about his current school.
> A: It's a great school . . . They don't play around with anything. They have a lot of rules and stuff and that's what I like about it . . . They keep an eye on them. Really, they don't play. There's school security . . . They just don't tolerate a lot of things. So that is what I like about it.

Kimberlyn, also a Los Angeles experimental-group parent, initially used her MTO assistance to move to the San Fernando Valley. When we interviewed her in 2004, she had moved her family back to the inner city in South Los Angeles. Kimberlyn complained of some racial harassment in her apartment complex in the Valley, but she told us her primary reason for moving back was to be closer to family, friends, and to what she perceived to be better access to institutional resources, such as job training.

Kimberlyn lamented having to move her adolescent son Damian from the better high school in the San Fernando Valley. The best she felt she could do for him in the city was to move him from one inner-city high school (the assigned one) to another, modestly safer one. Kimberlyn accomplished this switch by giving the school district the address of a friend as her own new address. She concluded, "Gangs is everywhere." During the period that we visited the family, Damian was at risk of not graduating and was, said Kimberlyn, "not taking school seriously and getting an attitude."

While safety concerns were much more common among the families we interviewed who were living in poorer, central-city neighborhoods—either because they had not made an initial move or because they had moved back—some MTO families living in the inner suburbs expressed similar concerns. When asked how she had chosen the middle school for her children, April, an experimental-group mother living in a Boston suburb, explained, "My kids told me." Yet, her children, Georgiana and Tevin, disagreed about which school to attend. Tevin wanted to be with friends at the nearest neighborhood school, while Georgiana wanted to attend a school slightly further away because it had more honors classes, better teachers, and was "less ghetto." When asked if she knew anything about either school, April replied, "Not really." In the end, April settled the dispute with a safety-first emphasis. Georgiana explained, "My mom said, 'No! Nobody is going to Holmes [Tevin's choice] because there are too many gangs and too many fights.'"

Some MTO parents felt they had to choose between the lesser of two evils.

Some MTO parents felt they had to choose between the lesser of two evils. For example, Robin, a black mother in the Los Angeles experimental group, moved first to an eastern suburb, then to another suburb nearby. After the latest move, Robin opted not to move her daughter Terri out of the local high school, where she was struggling to fit in with the mostly white and Mexican student body. At the school, Terri had "been jumped" (beaten up) by girls there and was seen "ditching" school (being truant). But despite Terri's problems, her mother still saw a stark contrast between this new school and the inner-city schools they left behind. Robin explained:

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

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

In other cases, the priority placed on safety helps explain why a small number of experimental-group parents kept their children in schools near their original housing project, even after the family moved to a new neighborhood in the city. In these cases, both parents and children noted that even if the schools in their old neighborhood were dangerous, the risks were well understood and therefore less threatening. For example, parents pointed to their hard-won knowledge about "gang colors" and which groups of children "caused trouble." Moving their children to a new school could mean moving them into new gang territory where the "colors" were less well understood and avoided.

Some youth were also hesitant to move from schools they knew were unsafe because they had a network of friends they could rely on to defend them ("watch their backs"), or because they had established understandings with "troublemakers" who would, in turn, offer needed protection. For example, Adam, a teen in the Section 8 comparison group in Los Angeles, left a new school to return to his old neighborhood school. "I want to be somewhere where I am more comfortable," he told us. "You know, I really don't know nobody [at the other school], all those other gangsters over there don't know me."

Counterexamples: Seeking Out Academically Promising Schools

As we noted above, many MTO parents emphasized safety and order as the overriding indicators of school quality, but some also expressed an interest in engaged and caring teachers and after-school programs or other resources for their children. About half the MTO parents we interviewed *who were aware of school choices available to them* spoke about taking extra steps to find schools that were not only safe but also academically promising in these other ways. In addition, as researchers have found for other low-income parents who seek to protect and enrich their children despite risks in school and in the neighborhood (Furstenberg et al. 1999; Jarrett 1995), a small number of achievement-oriented MTO parents also supplemented their "safety first" school choices with special arrangements.

Our analysis, however, showed that parents' choices did not have much to do with their location—that is, their valuable contacts who provided information about school programs were not neighbors—and those who relocated to low-poverty areas did not garner significant new information resources or other aid from neighbors.

Rather, their choices reflected their own focus on education and their willingness—and ability—to make special efforts to ensure their children attended the types of schools they felt would most benefit them.

Pamela, a 74-year-old mother in the New York control group, made special efforts to enroll her adopted children, Tricia and Eamon, in a college preparatory school in the Bronx. The children participated in after-school programs and special classes at the school. Though the children were only in the 6th grade, Pamela was already encouraging them to think about which colleges to attend. Eamon had even flown to Boston to visit Harvard and MIT, and Tricia, at the time our fieldwork ended, was set to visit colleges in California. Pamela obtained a computer for the children to use for school work and visited their school to check on their progress.

Jessica, a mother in the New York experimental group, ended up moving her family back from the low-poverty neighborhood where they were placed to an inner-city neighborhood. Jessica was a teacher's aide with a college degree and carefully researched school choices for her son James. She monitored his homework and academic progress constantly; she also kept track of enrichment opportunities in and around their neighborhood. Jessica was significantly better educated than most MTO parents; her living in public housing when MTO was launched reflected a particularly cash-poor spell in her life as a single mother, not chronic and extreme disadvantage.

In addition to highly educated women like Jessica, a handful of other, less well-educated MTO parents also took extra steps to find the right learning opportunities for their children. In one extreme example, a mother in the Los Angeles experimental group provided her employer's address in an affluent community as her own in order to get her children into the schools there—-a two-hour bus ride from their home. Monica, another mother in the Los Angeles experimental group, enrolled her two sons in the Catholic school where she worked, even though it was in their old neighborhood, a relatively poor enclave of Latino immigrants. Likewise, Laura and her children, in the New York control group, were actively involved in the charter school they attended in their inner-city community, participating in after-school programs. Her older sons worked at the school; during our fieldwork, one was pursuing his General Equivalency Diploma because it was an employment requirement.

Finally, some schools, though chosen for safety reasons, turned out to be academically enriching. As we noted above, Robin's daughter Terri ultimately adapted successfully to her high school in an eastern suburb of Los Angeles, despite struggling initially. Along with extracurricular involvement, a part-time job, and stronger grades, Terri had developed what experts describe as essential to the learning process: productive relationships with her teachers. As Terri told us, "You could put me in a class right now, and I could be the only black student, with that teacher, I wouldn't care. Cuz I know that teacher, and I know so much about that teacher, and I feel comfortable with that teacher teaching me."

Other Concerns That Limited Enrollment in "Better" Schools

MTO parents, like parents everywhere, generally favored schools for their children that were near the home or otherwise conveniently located. Low-income parents are especially likely to report convenient location as a priority, especially if they do not own automobiles or have access to good public transportation.[5] Laura in New York also explained that she liked having her children in a school nearby because she could get to them quickly if "anything were to happen." Very few emphasized the risk of lost academic credit, access to social supports, or the importance of making school and school-based friendships a source of stability for children amid the disruption of moving.

A few parents had arrangements with relatives or friends who lived in the former neighborhood, trusted people to pick up their children or watch them after school.

A handful of those parents chose not to change their children's schools after a move because they wanted to preserve their children's friendships and not force their children to find new friends or peers in new schools. Both parents and children mentioned that friendships were important for safety, but also for academic and social development. The parents felt that moving had disrupted other aspects of their children's lives and so wanted to keep school life and friendships more stable. Finally, not having good information with which to compare schools and their standards across different neighborhoods, a handful of parents specifically reported "good grades" at the old school, even if its standards and test scores were low relative to alternatives, as a sign of that school's good fit for their children.

Policy Implications

Our findings from the Three-City Study suggest two key reasons the MTO experiment did not get children to better schools. First, MTO did not enable most participating families to move to and stay in high-performing school districts or attendance zones. Second, because the MTO demonstration was a relocation-only strategy, it did not provide the services and supports that might have helped families make more informed choices about finding the best educational opportunities for their children. Likewise, the program was not able to help families address the complexities in their lives that made it difficult for them to focus on seeking out opportunity and forced them instead to focus on more basic issues like safety and balancing work schedules and child care needs.

But since housing choices *are* school choices for 7 of the 10 children in America who attend public schools, the limits of this particular relocation-only demonstration program for the inner-city poor should not dissuade policymakers and practitioners from making bolder, more informed efforts in the future. Our findings suggest several implications for future mobility efforts.

Targeting place: expand the definition of "opportunity neighborhoods." An obvious lesson of MTO thus far is that defining "opportunity neighborhoods" as census tracts that were less than 10 percent poor in 1990 was not sufficient to get families to communities with higher-performing schools. As the MTO interim evaluation documented and as our research underscores, experimental-group families generally ended up in less-poor neighborhoods in the same, troubled urban school districts. Others moved to inner suburban districts with growing poverty and social distress.

If we want to use housing assistance to significantly expand opportunity, we should directly target communities with high-performing schools, not rely on poverty rate, let alone a point-in-time rate, as a proxy measure. Since high-performing school districts or school communities are often primarily white, this targeting strategy means directly confronting exclusion and discrimination in the siting of affordable housing and the placement of families that use rental housing vouchers or other assistance.

Stability and exposure: help families stay in, not just get to, better neighborhoods. The basic conditions for academic success include not only safety, order, quality instruction, student and parental effort, and meaningful academic supports, but also *stability*—that is, being part of a school community long enough to understand one's choices, form productive relationships with teachers and staff and other students, and adapt to a new environment. The repeat moving reported by many members of the MTO experimental group directly undermined these processes. Further, ongoing counseling and support for families beyond the first move have shown promise as tools for encouraging better locational outcomes over the long run and might help families to stay in areas that offer a wider range of academic opportunities (Briggs and Turner 2006).

Program content: inform and expand school choices directly. Housing vouchers and mobility counseling could be directly tied to school choice programs that include institutional supports for less informed and typically more constrained parents. Social policy programs may never be perfectly integrated or seamlessly managed to focus on particular clients. But basic supports could address the serious information poverty of families on housing assistance, encouraging parents who have real choices to consider a wider choice set and a full range of indicators of schools' academic potential for their children. A case management approach to pre- and post-move counseling could ensure that families that participate in housing mobility programs understand the school options for their children when considering new neighborhoods, and ensure that after moving, the families meet school staff who can help.

Improved counseling: address families' concerns about safety, social supports, the disruptions of moving, and tough trade-offs. It is important for policymakers and program staff to understand the competing concerns for safety, academic and social disruption, convenience, and child care arrangements that low-income families typically consider when making school choices for their children. Here again, well-designed and well-managed counseling can address the complexity of these choices and the trade-offs families make.

Finally, the lack of affordable housing in neighborhoods with stronger school systems continues to powerfully limit the school choices available to low-income families. Policies to expand the supply of rental housing that is affordable and remains affordable for low- and moderate-income families are crucial if assisted housing mobility programs are to succeed in improving the life chances for poor families.

Notes

A longer version of this brief is forthcoming in *Housing Policy Debate*, volume 19, issue 1.

1. Sanbonmatsu and colleagues (forthcoming, 31) acknowledge that self-reports may reflect different frames of reference, such as higher expectations on the part of young experimental compliers who never attended inner-city schools. Also, other mediators of educational outcomes, such as employment or parenting practices, are less amenable to relocation-only interventions, and MTO interim survey data suggested minimal impacts on those mediators.
2. Another research team conducted qualitative research in the remaining two MTO sites (Chicago and Baltimore). See, for example, Clampet-Lundquist and colleagues (2006).
3. At the interim follow-up, experimental-group children and youth were more likely to be outside their origin district in greater Boston (32.9 percent) and Los Angeles (37.8 percent) than in Baltimore (23.6 percent), Chicago (18.3 percent), or New York (13.8 percent) (Orr et al. 2003).
4. All names are pseudonyms.
5. For example, in the carefully evaluated Alum Rock school voucher demonstration, 70 percent of low-income parents cited "location" as the primary reason for choosing their children's schools (Maddaus 1990).

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The Moving to Opportunity Demonstration

In 1994, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched the Moving to Opportunity Demonstration (MTO) in 1994 in five metropolitan areas: Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. MTO was a voluntary relocation program for very low income residents of public and assisted housing located in high-poverty neighborhoods in these cities. Those who volunteered were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups: a control group (families retained their public housing unit, but received no new assistance); a Section 8 comparison group (families received the standard counseling and a voucher subsidy for use in the private housing market); or an experimental group. The experimental group families received special relocation counseling (focused on opportunities to live in low-poverty areas) and search assistance. They also received a voucher usable only in a low-poverty neighborhood (less than 10 percent poor as of the 1990 Census), with the requirement that the family live there for at least one year.

Of the 1,820 families assigned to the experimental group, just under half (48 percent, or 860) found a willing landlord with a suitable rental unit and moved successfully or "leased up"; they were experimental "complier" families. The MTO Interim Impacts Evaluation—conducted in 2002, approximately five to seven years after families relocated—found that many experimental group families had moved again, some of them several times—and many moved out of their low-poverty neighborhoods. In addition, about 70 percent of the control group had moved out of public housing, mostly to other poor urban neighborhoods. Families in the MTO experimental group, however, were still much more likely to be living in low-poverty areas (whether the original placement areas or other areas) than their Section 8 voucher or control family counterparts. MTO families also had lived for longer periods in such areas than families in the other two groups.

The Three-City Study of MTO

The Three-City Study of MTO is a large-scale, mixed-method study focused on three MTO sites: Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. The study was designed to examine key puzzles that emerged in previous MTO research, including the Interim Evaluation, and combines analysis of MTO survey, census, and neighborhood indicator data with new, qualitative data collection. The family-level data were collected in 2004 and 2005—about 6 to 10 years after families' initial placement through the MTO program and 2 years after the Interim Evaluation data collection. First, we randomly selected 122 families, conducting 276 semistructured, in-depth qualitative interviews with parents, adolescents, and young adults in all three treatment groups. We included compliers (those who successfully moved at the outset) and noncompliers (those who did not move through the program) in the experimental and comparison groups, although we weighted compliers more heavily. Overall, we conducted 81 interviews in Boston, 120 in Los Angeles, and 75 in New York. The combined cooperation rate (consents as a share of eligible households contacted) was 80 percent. Next, we launched "family-focused" ethnographic fieldwork, visiting a subset of 39 control group and experimental-complier families repeatedly over six to eight months. The cooperation rate for the ethnographic subsample was 70 percent.

The Three-City Study of MTO is housed at the Urban Institute. The principal investigators are Xavier de Souza Briggs of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Susan Popkin of the Urban Institute, and John Goering of the City University of New York. The study is funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Annie E. Casey, Fannie Mae, Rockefeller, Smith-Richardson, and William T. Grant Foundations.

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