

Three-City Study
of Moving
to Opportunity

Have MTO Families Lost Access to Opportunity Neighborhoods Over Time?

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The 2002 neighborhoods of experimental-group families that had moved more than once still offered distinctly more favorable environments than those participants lived in before the MTO demonstration.

The 1980s saw a marked increase in the number of inner-city neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty. By the start of the next decade, Wilson (1987) and other scholars had documented the seriously detrimental effects such neighborhoods have on their residents, and poverty deconcentration had become a topic of interest in Washington. One federal effort launched to learn more about how to address the issue was the Moving to Opportunity demonstration (MTO).

Implemented by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), MTO enrolled more than 4,600 low-income families in five metropolitan areas (metros)—Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York—between 1994 and 1998. The participants, most of whom were racial or ethnic minorities and all of whom were living in inner-city HUD-assisted housing projects, were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups: an experimental group, a Section 8 group, and a control group (see text box on page 11 for more details).

As a part of an interim evaluation, MTO families were interviewed in 2002, four to eight years after they began participation. This brief examines the characteristics of the neighborhoods to which MTO families in all groups had moved as of those interviews. The interim assessment included a basic analysis of this topic, relying primarily on measures from the U.S.

Census (Orr et al. 2003). This brief summarizes the results of that analysis but then goes further in two respects:

1. by comparing the neighborhoods of the various groups using a broader array of indicators (e.g., distance from central business district, crime rate) and showing how the MTO destination neighborhoods compare with those of all Section 8 voucher recipients in the MTO metros, and
2. by focusing analysis on one group that is of special interest for policy: experimental-group families that moved again after their initial move to a low-poverty neighborhood.

The new data strongly reinforce findings of the earlier research, showing that the neighborhoods experimental-group families moved to initially were indeed better than those they had left behind in many dimensions. And the magnitude of the differences is striking. For example, the violent crime rate in their new neighborhoods was on average 72 percent lower than that of their old neighborhoods.

Perhaps the most troubling finding of the interim evaluation, however, was that some of the initial gains had eroded by 2002; a sizeable share of the experimental-group families had moved again by then, and many of those moves appeared to be in the wrong direction, back to neighborhoods

with higher concentrations of poverty and minority residents. This brief looks at the 2002 destination neighborhoods of these participants in more depth and finds that, in fact, they still offered distinctly more favorable environments than those participants lived in before the demonstration. More telling, these neighborhoods were substantially better on average than the 2002 neighborhoods of the MTO Section 8 group—those who had also moved with Section 8 vouchers but were not required to move to a low-income neighborhood initially. This certainly supports the hypothesis that the initial move requirements made a difference.

Summary of Earlier Findings

The neighborhoods where MTO experimental-group families lived before the program were indeed among the most distressed in their metropolitan areas: 93 percent lived in neighborhoods with poverty rates exceeding 30 percent (compared with

only 12 percent of all households nationally), and 91 percent lived in tracts where minorities accounted for 60 percent or more of the population (compared with a metropolitan average of 38 percent nationally).

It was hoped that participants in the MTO demonstration would notably enhance their well-being and life chances by moving to much better neighborhoods. That is in fact what occurred, although not always in predicted ways (table 1).

- For various reasons, many families selected by random assignment (53 percent of the experimental group and 39 percent of the Section 8 group) were unable to “lease up” and use their program vouchers.
- Those who did lease up and move, however, moved as required to neighborhoods with much lower poverty rates. Most experimental movers complied with program rules and moved initially to tracts with 1990 poverty rates below 10 percent, but many of these tracts

experienced increases in poverty over the decade. Still, 91 percent of participants’ initial moves were to neighborhoods with less than 20 percent poverty in 2000. Among initial Section 8 group moves, 26 percent achieved that standard. Although they did not receive vouchers, a surprising 70 percent of the control group had also moved by 2002, but only 17 percent of them moved to neighborhoods with 2000 poverty rates below 20 percent. For the movers’ initial destination neighborhoods, the average poverty rates were 13 percent for the experimental group, 29 percent for the Section 8 group, and 34 percent for the control group.

- These moves, however, did not make as much of a difference in minority concentrations. The shares of initial moves to neighborhoods where minorities represented less than 20 percent of the 2000 total population were only 5.7 percent for experimental-group movers, 2.2 percent for Section 8–group

TABLE 1. Summary Comparison of Neighborhood Characteristics: MTO Experimental, Section 8, and Control Groups

	MTO EXPERIMENTAL GROUP					
	Total		All Program Movers		Section 8 group 2002	Control group 2002
	Original	2002	Initial move	2002		
No. of tracts	117	751	380	505	617	514
No. households (000)	1,715	1,477	815	695	1,027	1,133
Percent of Total Households						
By poverty rate, 2000						
0–10%	0	13	41	24	6	4
10–20%	2	22	50	35	20	13
20–30%	5	16	8	19	19	15
30–40%	20	19	1	12	23	21
40+ %	73	30	1	10	33	47
By percent minority, 2000						
0–20%	0	4	11	6	3	2
20–40%	4	7	13	11	5	5
40–60%	3	7	15	10	8	6
60–80%	4	9	16	13	8	10
80+ %	89	74	45	60	76	77

Source: Urban Institute analysis of interim assessment survey data.

movers, and 2.6 percent for control-group movers. For the movers' initial destination neighborhoods, the average neighborhood minority shares were 68 percent for the experimental group, 84 percent for the Section 8 group, and 85 percent for the control group.

- A substantial share of the initial movers (65 percent of experimental-group lease-ups and 66 percent of Section 8-group lease-ups) had made one or more additional moves by the time of the 2002 interviews. For the experimental group, these moves tended to reverse some of the initial gains. The average poverty rate of the 2002 neighborhoods of these families was 24 percent (up from 13 percent for the initial moves), and the average minority share was 79 percent (up from 68 percent for the initial moves). In contrast, poverty and minority rates of 2002 neighborhoods for multiple movers in the Section 8 group were much the same as the destinations of their initial moves.

- Considering the experimental group as a whole (all families the program "intended to treat"), families on average were living in much better neighborhoods in 2002 than when the demonstration began,

although the contrasts with the other groups were not as great as might have been expected ahead of time. Experimental-group scores were not as good as they would have been if a higher share had leased up and fewer movers had moved back to poorer neighborhoods. And the scores for the other two groups were better than might have been expected because of their own mobility. As shown in table 1, differences in poverty rates between the groups were nonetheless substantial. The shares of families in neighborhoods with poverty rates below 20 percent in 2002 were 35 percent for the full experimental group, 26 percent for the Section 8 group, and 17 percent for the control group. Differences in racial and ethnic composition, however, are not as large. The average minority percentages of the 2002 neighborhoods were 83 percent for the experimental group, 86 percent for the Section 8 group, and 88 percent for the control group.

These results were fairly uniform across the five MTO sites (table 2). Looking at the 2002 neighborhoods of all groups, the basic pattern was the same everywhere. For both poverty and race, on average, experimental-

group movers lived in less-concentrated neighborhoods than the overall experimental group, which in turn had better scores than the MTO Section 8 group and, by an even larger extent, the control group. There were variations, but they may be at least partly explained by differences in poverty and racial or ethnic concentration in these metro areas overall. MTO outcomes were generally more favorable in Boston than in the other sites, particularly versus racial concentration in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. But, as shown in the table, smaller shares of *all* Boston metro tracts had high concentrations of poor and minority households to begin with (particularly compared with Los Angeles and New York).

Neighborhood Outcomes for Movers

The evidence is clear that MTO experimental-group movers gained substantially from their initial relocation to low-poverty neighborhoods (Goering and Feins 2003; Orr et al. 2003). In a few areas (e.g., employment and school achievement), there was not as much improvement as hoped, but changes were positive and noteworthy in several others (e.g., safety, mental and physical health, physical

TABLE 2. 2002 Neighborhoods by MTO Site

	Total	Baltimore	Boston	Chicago	Los Angeles	New York
Percent in tracts with poverty rates < 20%						
Exp. group—total	35	39	44	31	31	26
Exp. group—moved	59	57	71	64	45	57
Section 8 group	26	29	33	21	22	12
Control group	17	26	23	19	7	5
All metro households (2000)	78	86	90	85	67	63
Percent in tracts with minority shares < 60%						
Exp. group—total	18	21	42	7	12	8
Exp. group—moved	27	29	61	13	18	12
Section 8 group	16	19	38	5	5	7
Control group	13	13	34	3	4	6
All metro households (2000)	69	80	93	74	44	53

Source: Urban Institute analysis of interim assessment survey data.

aspects of housing and the neighborhood environment).

Among the findings of the interim assessment, however, perhaps the greatest worry was that so many initial beneficiaries had moved back in what seemed the wrong direction by 2002, possibly threatening the gains that had been achieved. These results led one researcher to suggest they were a “telling indication of how difficult it is to intervene in the complex process of housing choice” and to conclude that they raise “questions about the cost benefits of the intervention policy” (Clark 2005, 15312).

It is not surprising that so many experimental-group families had moved by 2002. A large share of America’s families move every year, and rates are typically highest among low-income groups. The question is what kinds of neighborhoods participants chose after their initial exposure to better neighborhoods in MTO. Does the process represent a slippery slope on which participants eventually wind up moving back to seriously distressed environments like those where they started, or do their locational choices represent some third way?

These later moves have not been examined carefully to this point. To go further, we believe it is most relevant to compare the neighborhood destinations of the experimental-group multiple movers to multiple movers in the MTO Section 8 group because their characteristics are so similar (predominantly low-income minority families originating in distressed inner-city HUD projects).

However, we also make new comparisons to the locational patterns of two other groups: (1) all Section 8 voucher holders in these five metros (as of 2004—likely to live in better neighborhoods on average than the MTO Section 8 families); and (2) all households living in these metros (as of 2000—likely to be even more heavily weighted toward better neighborhoods).

We begin by looking at differences in poverty and minority rates but then look at several other indicators. We find that the 2002 neighborhoods of the experimental-group families with multiple moves are notably better on average than those of their MTO Section 8-group counterparts in many dimensions. This analysis presents only the broad quantitative differences. A companion brief in this series examines housing search processes in the demonstra-

tion (Boston, Los Angeles, and New York, only), emphasizing MTO participants’ perspectives as well as market context (Comey, Briggs, and Weismann 2008). This work helps us understand what is driving the outcomes described here.

Poverty and Minority Rates

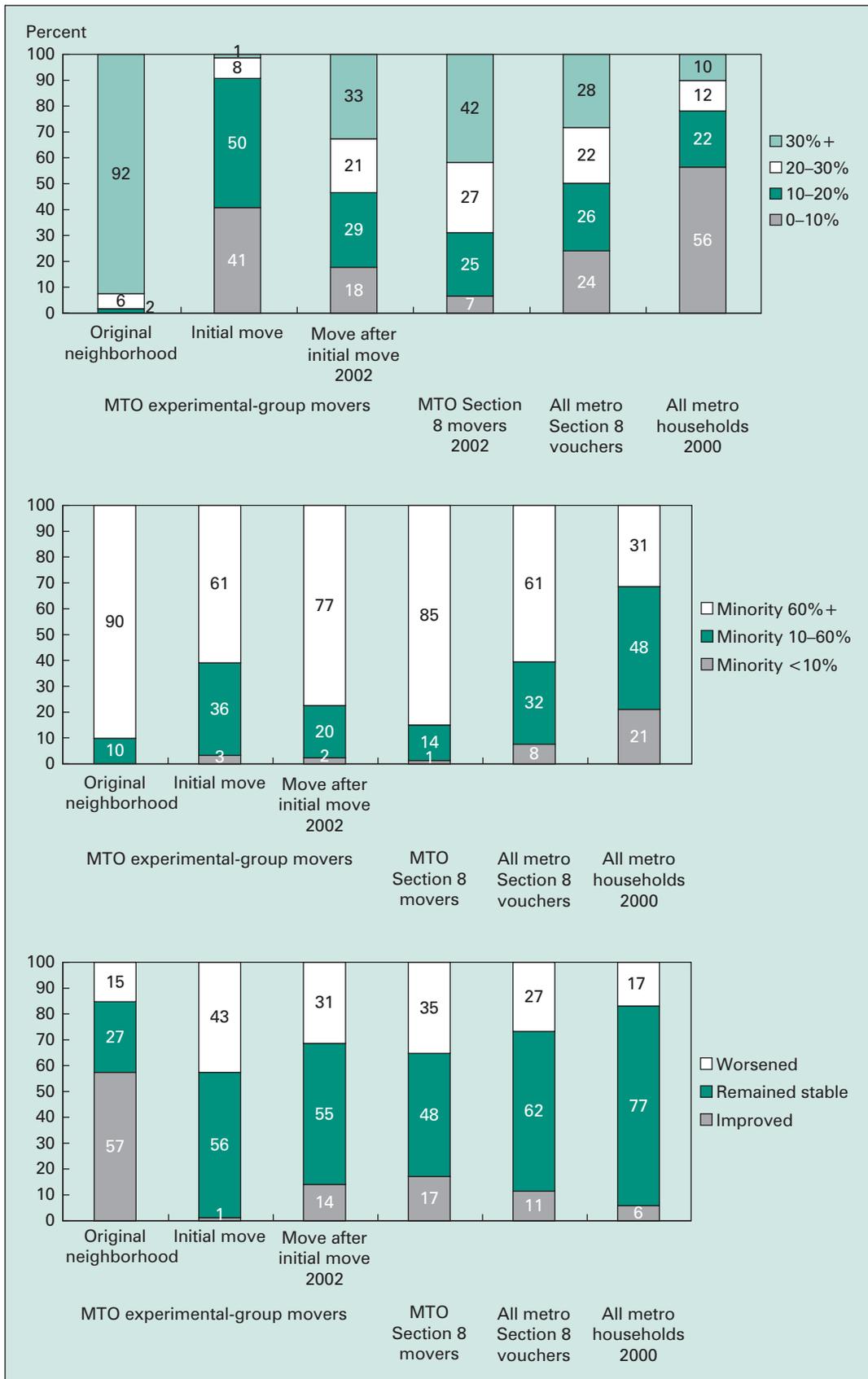
The top chart in figure 1 shows that, consistent with the averages presented earlier, the 2002 neighborhoods of multiple movers from the experimental group were considerably less poor than those of the MTO Section 8 group. Almost half (47 percent) of the experimental group had found new residences in neighborhoods with low poverty rates (less than 20 percent), compared with only 32 percent of MTO Section 8 families. The comparable shares were exactly 50 percent for all Section 8 voucher holders and 78 percent for all metro households. Most strikingly, 18 percent of the experimental group made its most recent moves to neighborhoods with less than 10 percent poverty, compared with only 7 percent of MTO Section 8 multiple movers.

The second chart shows that again, however, the differences in minority concentrations were not as great: 77 percent of the experimental-group multiple movers lived in tracts where minorities represented 60 percent or more of the population in 2002. This compares with a yet-higher 85 percent for the MTO Section 8 group but only 61 percent for all voucher holders and 31 percent for all metro households.

Poverty Rate Trajectories

The bottom chart in figure 1 warrants more explanation. We divided all census tracts in the five MTO metros into three groups based on how their poverty rates changed over a decade: *improved* (poverty rate went down 5 percentage points or more), *worsened* (poverty rate went up 5 points or more), and *remained stable* (rate changed less than 5 points in either direction). Calculating these proportions for the 100 largest U.S. metropolitan areas, 11 percent of all tracts improved in the 1990s (up impressively from only 8 percent in the 1980s), and most of those started out in the high-poverty categories. This corroborates what has become a well-known finding calculated in other ways—namely, that there was

FIGURE 1. Neighborhoods of MTO Movers and Comparison Groups: Poverty Rates, Minority Rates and Change in Poverty (percent)



Source: Urban Institute analysis of interim assessment survey data.

a notable drop in the concentration of poverty in metropolitan America in the 1990s (Jargowsky 2003; Kingsley and Pettit 2003).

However, less has been made of the fact that an even larger share of tracts “worsened” in the 1990s: 15 percent of the total in the 100 largest metros. This is still consistent with the deconcentration of poverty trend, however, since that number represented a sizeable decrease from the 1980s, when 19 percent had declined. Not surprisingly, most of the worsening tracts started out in the lower poverty categories.

The bar charts indicate what might at first appear to be a strange pattern. A sizeable share of the destination neighborhoods of the initial experimental-group movers (43 percent) and of those who made subsequent moves (31 percent) was worsening. In contrast, only 1 percent of the initial move destinations, and 14 percent of the subsequent move destinations, were improving. This pattern is explained mostly just by where these different types of tracts tend to be. Generally, tracts with lower poverty rates were much more likely to be worsening and those with higher poverty rates were more likely to be improving.

It seems that the fact that MTO experimental-group movers generally went to high-minority neighborhoods, however, also played an important role in this finding. In the five MTO metros, predominantly minority tracts (those where minorities accounted for more than 60 percent of the 2000 population) accounted for 63 percent of all tracts that worsened in the 1990s, and those in the 10–60 percent minority range accounted for another 34 percent. Tracts with fewer than 20 percent minority residents accounted for 21 percent of all tracts in these metros but for only 3 percent of the worsening tracts. In other words, among tracts with comparatively low poverty rates, those that worsened in the 1990s were generally those where minorities were present in significant numbers in 2000.

On this indicator too, the pattern for multiple movers in the experimental group is better than that for the MTO Section 8 group: 31 percent of the 2002 neighborhoods of the former had worsened, compared with 35 percent for the latter.

Social and Housing Conditions

Table 3 compares the neighborhoods of the different groups using a broader set of indi-

cators. The first contrasts of note here are those between the neighborhoods the experimental-group movers lived in before the program and those of their initial move. For example, on average, the former had a dramatically higher public assistance rate (39 percent versus 10 percent), a higher share of residents over 25 lacking high school degrees (51 percent versus 22 percent), and a lower homeownership rate (11 percent versus 56 percent). The populations of their old neighborhoods had dropped by 17 percent on average over the 1990s, whereas their new neighborhoods witnessed an average 9 percent population growth.

On these indicators too, the 2002 neighborhoods of the experimental-group multiple movers score consistently worse than those of the experimental-group initial movers but better than those of the movers in the MTO Section 8 group. In several cases the differences are fairly small, but they are sizeable for some important measures of neighborhood quality and health. Comparing the 2002 neighborhoods of multiple movers in the experimental group versus the MTO Section 8 group, the former had significantly higher population growth over the 1990s (7 percent versus 4 percent), fewer residents over age 25 without a high school degree (33 percent versus 37 percent), and, perhaps most important, a notably higher rate of homeownership (41 percent versus 34 percent).

The average scores for the neighborhoods of MTO Section 8–group movers were, with much consistency, worse than those for all voucher holders in these metropolitan areas. The latter were, in turn, more like those of the experimental-group multiple movers. This comparison is significant. All movers in the MTO experimental and Section 8 groups had been living in some of the most troubled concentrated poverty environments in their cities, while Section 8 voucher recipients had previously lived in much better neighborhoods on average (a notable share came from the suburbs). The fact that the MTO experimental-group multiple movers wound up in neighborhoods similar to the overall voucher population thus marks a notable positive change for them given their backgrounds.

Most would expect the average neighborhood conditions of all households in these metropolitan areas to be even better than the average for voucher recipients. To

TABLE 3. Selected Neighborhood Characteristics of MTO Movers and Comparison Groups (percent)

	MTO Experimental-Group Movers			MTO Section 8 movers 2002	All metro Section 8 vouchers 2004	All metro households 2000
	Original neighborhood	Initial move	Move after initial move 2002			
Demographics						
Minority	91	67	79	85	64	42
Foreign born	18	21	19	21	22	21
Population growth 1990–2000	–17	9	7	4	8	16
Moved 1995–2000	43	42	44	46	46	44
Income and employment						
Population below poverty level	50	12	24	28	22	13
Population > age 16 not working	65	41	49	52	47	40
Other social indicators						
Households receiving public assistance	39	10	20	22	17	9
Population > age 25 with no high school degree	51	22	33	37	31	21
Female-headed households with children	65	33	45	48	38	23
Population age 16–19 not working or in school	23	10	14	16	13	9
Housing						
Owner-occupied housing	11	56	41	34	39	55
Rental vacancy rate	7	5	6	6	5	4

Source: Urban Institute analysis of interim assessment survey data.

Note: Movers include only those moving in compliance with program rules.

our knowledge, however, this brief is the only place to date where that comparison is made explicitly. The results are generally as anticipated. For example, the average 2000 poverty rate for the voucher holders was 22 percent compared with 13 percent for all households; the homeownership rate was 39 percent for the former versus 55 percent for the latter. The average minority population share was 64 percent for the neighborhoods of voucher holders compared with 42 percent for all households.

In the context of this brief, two things warrant emphasis. First, the contrasts in well-being between the conditions in the original neighborhoods of MTO participants and those in the neighborhoods of voucher holders on average are dramatically greater than those between the latter and the average conditions for all metropolitan households. Second, the initial move neighborhoods of MTO experimental households were notably better on a num-

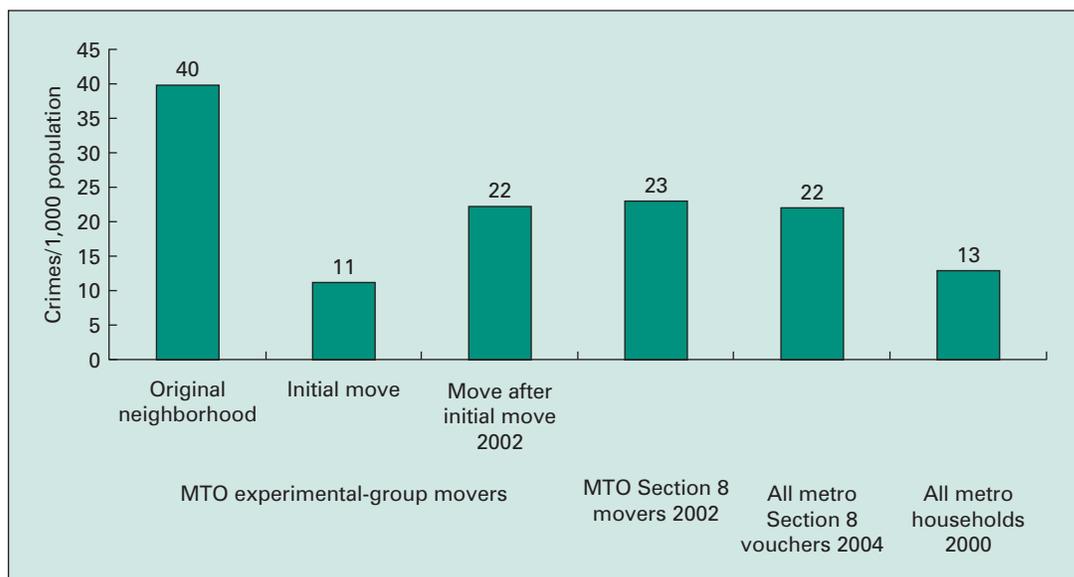
ber of dimensions than the average for voucher recipients.

Violent Crime Rates

The interim evaluation showed that many in the experimental group felt that moving away from the stress of a high-crime environment was the greatest benefit of their participation in MTO. Data on violent crimes are available at the tract level (from Peterson and Krivo 2006) for only three of the five sites, but the conclusion is consistent in all three: crime rates in participants' pre-MTO neighborhoods were indeed dramatically higher than in the neighborhoods they first moved to under MTO. Figure 2 shows that the number of violent crimes per 1,000 population per year (average for the 1999–2001 period) was 39.8 in the former versus only 11.2 in the latter (72 percent lower).

The 2002 neighborhoods of experimental-group families that moved again had a

FIGURE 2. Violent Crime Rates for Neighborhoods of MTO Movers and Comparison Groups



Source: Urban Institute analysis of interim assessment survey data.

Notes: Data shown are for Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Violent crime rate = average annual aggravated assaults, robberies, and murders per 1,000 population, 1999–2001.

notably higher violent crime rate than that: 22.2 per 1,000, about the same as the averages for the neighborhoods of the MTO Section 8 movers and for all Section 8 families in these cities. What is striking, however, is that this level still represents a marked improvement over the 39.8 average for the neighborhoods the experimental families lived in before MTO.

Metropolitan Location

It is important to know not only the comparative poverty rates of the destination neighborhoods for these groups, but also where in their metropolitan areas they were located. If most experimental-group movers relocated to low-poverty areas very near their original inner-city projects, we would expect higher risks of future problems than if they moved to locations much farther out in the metropolis. Whether the move destinations were concentrated in just a few locations or more spread out could have very different implications for jurisdictional responsibilities and responses.

To find out about these patterns, we divided the tracts in each of the five metropolitan areas into seven geographical divisions (following the approach developed by Berube and Forman 2002). The first

includes all central-city tracts with centroids located within one mile of the centroid of the central business district (CBD). We then established three other rings within the central city, dividing all remaining central-city tracts into terciles based on the distance between their centroids and that of the CBD. Finally, we defined three suburban rings similarly, dividing all suburban tracts into terciles based on the distance between their centroids and that of the central-city CBD.

As shown in table 4, the patterns were again strongly contrasting. Whereas 38 percent of the experimental-group movers moved to the suburbs initially, only 25 percent of those who moved again lived in suburban neighborhoods in 2002, though this was still a much larger share than the 14 percent registered by the MTO Section 8–group movers. It is not surprising that the suburban share for all metropolitan voucher holders (44 percent) was so much higher than those for the MTO groups, since many of the former started out in suburban locations.

Both within the central cities and within the suburbs, the 2002 locations of the experimental-group multiple movers tended to be more decentralized (fewer in the inner rings and more in the outer rings) than their MTO Section 8 counterparts.

TABLE 4. *Neighborhoods of MTO Movers and Comparison Groups: Distance from Central Business District (CBD) and Concentration of Section 8 Vouchers (percent)*

	MTO Experimental-Group Movers			MTO Section 8 movers 2002	All metro Section 8 vouchers 2004	All metro households 2000
	Original neighborhood	Initial move	Move after initial move 2002			
Households by city/suburban location						
Central city	100	62	75	86	56	42
Suburbs	—	38	25	14	44	58
By location in central city						
City CBD + ring 1	52	9	28	30	24	26
City, ring 2	31	26	32	33	38	30
City, ring 3	16	65	40	37	39	44
By location in suburbs						
Suburbs, ring 1	—	35	40	52	36	27
Suburbs, ring 2	—	53	37	38	31	33
Suburbs, ring 3	0	12	24	10	33	40
Households by Section 8 voucher holders as percentage of households in tract						
< 2%	71	56	50	21	38	76
2–4.9%	14	31	22	33	30	16
5–9.9%	12	11	17	28	22	6
10% or more	3	2	11	18	10	2

Source: Urban Institute analysis of interim assessment survey data.

Notes: Movers include only those moving in compliance with program rules. All households refers to all households in the five metro areas.

The largest contrast between these groups appears in the bottom rows of table 4. While there has been much conjecture about the spatial concentration of Section 8 voucher holders in urban America, the data show that the pattern in the five MTO metros, at least, was dispersed in 2004. Only 10 percent of all voucher holders lived in tracts where voucher holders account for 10 percent or more of all households. In fact, 38 percent lived in neighborhoods where the Section 8 share was miniscule (less than 2 percent of all households).

The locations of the MTO experimental-group's initial moves were even more dispersed than that: 56 percent had moved to tracts where voucher holders represented less than 2 percent of all households. Most impressive here, however, is the fact that those from this group who moved again did not much diminish that rate; 50 percent still lived in such tracts in 2002. This represents a pronounced difference from the result for the MTO Section 8-group movers, where consider-

ably less than half that share (21 percent) wound up in these low-Section 8 density neighborhoods.

Conclusions and Implications

Prior research has shown that the initial neighborhoods MTO experimental-group families moved to represented a marked improvement over the environments of concentrated poverty and distress in which they had lived before. The new data presented in this brief reinforce that conclusion along additional dimensions and allow us to see comparisons more sharply. For many key indicators of neighborhood well-being, these MTO initial move neighborhoods scored closer to the averages for the neighborhoods of all households than they did even for those of all Section 8 voucher recipients.

But will this make a difference in the long run? Clearly, the data presented here cannot answer that question in a satisfying manner. They do, however, offer hints in that direction.

Suppose the experimental group had been offered vouchers but had neither been required to move to low-poverty neighborhoods initially nor received counseling to help them do so. We would expect they would wind up in neighborhoods similar to those of the MTO Section 8 group, since both the characteristics of the households and the program treatment for both groups would then have been the same. But that clearly did not occur.

By 2002, many in the experimental group continued to live in their initial move neighborhoods, with scores on relevant indicators considerably better than those of the MTO Section 8 group at that time. More important, the 2002 neighborhoods of experimental households with multiple moves also scored notably better along many dimensions, on average, than those of the MTO Section 8 group, albeit by not nearly as much as those of their own initial moves.

It is important to remember that the averages mask considerable variation. By 2002, a significant number of the experimental households with multiple moves had relocated to higher-end communities much like those they had moved to initially. At the other extreme, an even larger number had moved back to highly distressed inner-city neighborhoods, and more fell in between. That same sort of locational diversity characterizes the destinations of the MTO Section 8 group. It is just that a much smaller share of that group wound up at the better end, and many more wound up at the worse end, of the distribution.

While more remains to be learned, Comey and colleagues (2008) provide insights on the motivations behind the locational choices of both groups, showing that they are indeed complex and varied. Nonetheless, recognizing all the complexity, the net effect is still important for public policy. The evidence presented here shows that the net yield in neighborhood betterment will be higher by investing in the experimental approach than in the MTO Section 8 approach. Determining whether those benefits are worth the additional costs will require further research. The question warrants priority in future studies of MTO.

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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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