



## Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

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# Residential Mobility during Adolescence: Even “Upward” Moves Predict High School Dropout<sup>1</sup>

By Molly W. Metzger, Patrick J. Fowler, and Bennett Kelberman

Racial and economic segregation have long endured as systemic challenges in U.S. metropolitan areas. To combat the inequalities of segregation, two broad policy approaches have emerged: (1) *preservation* stresses investment in low-income neighborhoods, and (2) *mobility* stresses moving households in low-income areas to more affluent areas.<sup>2</sup> Our recent study reveals some possible unintended consequences of the latter approach, particularly for adolescents. We find that moving during adolescence is associated with decreased odds of graduating from high school, even when moving to significantly higher income neighborhoods.

## Background

Despite the diminished rates of Americans' residential mobility over past decades, low-income families with children consistently face increased rates of mobility relative to the general population.<sup>3</sup> Past surveys have found that low-income households were more prone to experience mobility within their counties than between counties or states, a trend that suggests more frequent involuntary relocations for such families.<sup>4</sup> The increased foreclosure rates and greater residential instability of the recent economic recession exacerbated this pattern.<sup>5</sup> Prior studies have shown mobility to forecast adverse educational outcomes for youth, notably in their high school graduation rates.<sup>6</sup> However, little prior research has examined the role of neighborhood characteristics using data from national samples.

The neighborhoods in which youth grow up substantially influence their development. Living in a given area can determine the education adolescents receive, the availability of public services, the level of exposure to crime, and social networks and norms. Past research has suggested the significance of *social capital*—the benefits derived from one's social networks—on adolescents' cognitive and social development.<sup>7</sup> Increases in neighborhood moves may impede children's social capital by interfering with their connections

to greater support systems (e.g., parents, extended family, teachers, peers, neighbors, other faces in the community).<sup>8</sup>

In this study, we explore the role of housing mobility on adolescents' high school graduation rates in the context of their neighborhood and peer changes. An important component to the research is its investigation of whether a move to an economically stronger neighborhood could have the effect of curbing this adverse relationship between mobility and graduation. The primary research questions we seek to answer are (1) What are some of the major predictors of moving during adolescence?, (2) How do high school graduation rates differ between adolescents who move versus those who do not?, and (3) Does the quality of movers' new neighborhoods affect the harm associated with moving?

## Data

This study uses data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative study that follows children into early adulthood.<sup>9</sup> Add Health tracked high school and middle school students and observed numerous developmental outcomes, including educational attainment. The sample of students came from public, private, and parochial schools from all regions of the country. This study uses Add Health data sets combining self-reported survey data with neighborhood data from the U.S. Census.

## Results

### Families that experience a change in composition are more likely to move.

Our study begins with an examination of the major predictors of residential mobility. Consistent with prior research, we find that families experiencing divorce or other change in family composition are more likely



to move than those that do not; children in such families are almost five times more likely to move at least once. Adolescents whose parents are married, and those whose parents have more than a college education, are less likely to experience a move. Notably, adolescents who report high levels of social cohesion in their neighborhoods are also less likely to move.

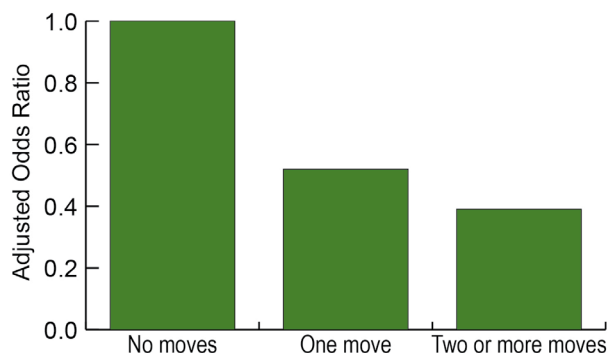
### The number of residential moves directly correlates to the likelihood of dropout risk.

We then examine how mobility predicts adolescents' likelihood of high school graduation. After accounting for a host of control variables,<sup>10</sup> we find that youth who moved once are 48% less likely to graduate high school, and youth who moved twice or more are 61% less likely to graduate, when compared to those who experienced no moves (Figure 1). The risk of moving remains regardless of whether or not participants change schools.

### High school dropout risk exists regardless of the risk level of neighborhoods to which families move—even for “upward” moves.

Finally, we explore how moving to neighborhoods of varying socioeconomic risk levels affects the likelihood of high school graduation. For families experiencing residential moves, we separate data by mobility to lower-, same-, and higher-

**Figure 1. Odds of graduating high school based on moving during adolescence**



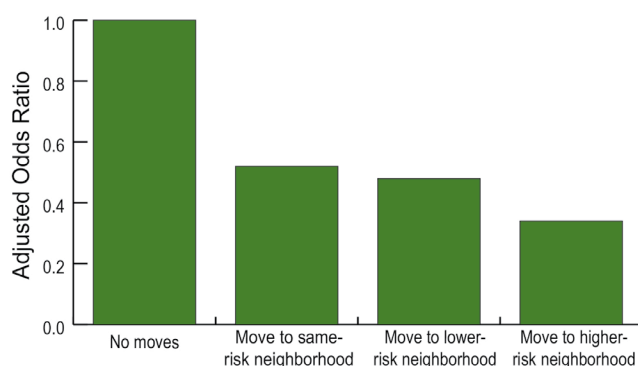
Adapted from “Residential Mobility during Adolescence: Do Even “Upward” Moves Predict Dropout Risk?” by M. W. Metzger, P. J. Fowler, C. L. Anderson, and C. A. Lindsay, 2015, *Social Science Research*, 53, pp. 218-230.

risk neighborhoods. We calculate risk level using Census data of the neighborhood’s median income, unemployment rate, poverty rate, and percentage of its residents aged at least 25 years without a high school diploma or equivalent degree. Results show that high school graduation rates diminish after moves to all types of neighborhoods, regardless of their relative risk. Moving to a neighborhood with similar economic risk to the original neighborhood resulted in a 48% decreased chance of high school graduation compared to those who did not move at all. Not surprisingly, the odds decreased further—to a 66% reduction of the likelihood of graduating—for those moving to a higher-risk neighborhood. However, even for those moving to a lower-risk neighborhood, the likelihood of graduating dropped by 52% compared to those who did not move at all (Figure 2).

### Conclusion

The findings of the study provide further evidence that residential moves may detrimentally affect adolescent educational outcomes. Youth whose families move suffer lower high school graduation rates than those who do not, with multiple moves corresponding to lower graduation rates. Furthermore, the “upward” moves do not alleviate these ill effects. Youth in families experiencing upward neighborhood mobility see similar decreased odds of high school graduation as those in families that make downward or parallel moves. Essentially, adolescent educational development appears to be

**Figure 2. Odds of graduating high school for adolescents experiencing different types of moves**



Adapted from “Residential Mobility during Adolescence: Do Even “Upward” Moves Predict Dropout Risk?” by M. W. Metzger, P. J. Fowler, C. L. Anderson, and C. A. Lindsay, 2015, *Social Science Research*, 53, pp. 218-230.

hindered by changing neighborhoods across multiple types of moves.

Conclusions from this research carry implications for housing policy. Programs that require families to change neighborhoods should be mindful of holistic family needs to avoid unintended consequences on youth. For families that need to move, access to proper resources and mental health supports may have the effect of averting youth educational deficiencies associated with mobility. Social service assistance programs should be optimized for mobile families, including means of early detection of housing instability. Moreover, community building and neighborhood development may naturally preclude the housing instability or disturbances moving causes. Future research could study the benefits of such preservation methods that aim to lessen or prevent the disruption residential moves have on youth and their families.

## Endnotes

1. This research brief summarizes the original article: Metzger, M. W., Fowler, P. J., Anderson, C. L., & Lindsay, C. A. (2015). Residential mobility during adolescence: Do even “upward” moves predict dropout risk? *Social Science Research*, 53, 218-230.
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10. These control variables included adolescents' age, sex, race/ethnicity, immigrant status, vocabulary test scores, whether the adolescent had ever been suspended from school, whether the respondents' parents had ever been married to one another, recent divorce or other major change in family composition, and number of siblings. We additionally controlled for parent's highest level of educational attainment, whether the household received public assistance, whether the family received any type of housing subsidy, and the urbanicity of the respondent's home at Wave 1 (urban, suburban, or rural).

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