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# Increasing Access to High Performing Schools in an Assisted Housing Voucher Program

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# Increasing Access to High Performing Schools in an Assisted Housing Voucher Program

BY STEFANIE DELUCA AND PETER ROSENBLATT

In America, housing choice is school choice. Where a family lives determines the quality of their children's education. This connection has profound consequences for social inequality.<sup>1</sup> For middle class families, housing and school choice is a calculated process, infused with high quality information, financial advantage, and resource rich ties.<sup>2</sup> For poor and minority families, where their children attend school is a direct function of constrained housing opportunities, and often related to housing discrimination, access to public transportation or where parents can find low wage work.<sup>3</sup> As a result, over 70% of minority children attend high poverty and mostly segregated schools and their test scores lag precipitously behind their white counterparts.<sup>4</sup>

In recent decades, housing mobility programs have been implemented as a way to combat the spatial disadvantages that black families face because of residential segregation. Programs that provide vouchers for families to move to more affluent, non-segregated neighborhoods can also allow them to access quality schools, safe neighborhoods, and job opportunities that are often divided along racial lines in American metropolitan areas. In this paper, we use data from one such assisted mobility program, where poor families (former and current public housing residents, or those on the waiting list for housing assistance) receive subsidies and counseling to relocate to more opportunity rich communities. We focus on the changes in educational opportunity that low-income families can enjoy as a function of moving to better performing school districts. We find that moving with the Baltimore Housing Mobility program provides families with access to schools that have more than twice as many qualified teachers, poverty rates that are 50%

lower than their original neighborhood schools, and significantly better academic performance than the schools that they attended before the program.

## BACKGROUND

It has long been noted that schooling opportunities for disadvantaged children are limited by the racial segregation and concentrated poverty found in many American cities.<sup>5</sup> Because most children attend zoned neighborhood schools, disadvantaged minority families generally do not have a choice to send their children to more integrated or higher quality schools. Despite demographic changes that have increased Hispanic and Asian populations dramatically over the past fifty years, minority students remain isolated from white peers, and almost forty percent of black and Latino students attend schools that are less than ten percent white.<sup>6</sup>

Most of this white-minority school segregation is between-districts—whites continue to live in separate, often suburban school districts, while minorities often attend city schools.<sup>7</sup> This finding underscores the links between school and residential segregation; Massey and Denton (1993) point out that the organization of public schools around geographic catchment areas reinforces the concentration of poverty and race. Rivkin (1994) and Orfield and Luce (2010) emphasize that residential segregation has severely limited school desegregation efforts and conclude that students need to be able to move across district boundaries to reduce racial isolation. The segregation of urban school systems rests on a foundation of segregated housing; as a result, school desegregation plans from *Brown v. Board of Education*

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onward have been ill-equipped to solve the problem of racial isolation in public schools.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to school desegregation plans like bussing, or school choice vouchers and other school-based options, housing choice vouchers (formerly called Section-8) have the potential to help families change their neighborhoods as well as their schools. As an alternative to regular Section-8 vouchers, a number of housing interventions have provided low income African-American families, often residents of public housing, with housing vouchers that allow them to move to higher opportunity neighborhoods with significantly higher performing schools. These interventions are often the result of fair housing lawsuits, and unlike traditional “hard unit” public housing (where families are assigned to a development that is often in a high poverty or racially segregated area) or the Section 8 program (through which families tend to lease-up in units that are in somewhat lower poverty but still often in segregated neighborhoods), families that participate in mobility programs are either assigned to units in more advantaged areas or they are counseled and helped to overcome barriers to leasing in census tracts that fall under a certain race or poverty threshold. These special voucher programs can provide a unique window on how low-income families engage new opportunities, especially when it comes to changing school districts.

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The first such housing voucher program came as a result of a court ordered remedy to a housing desegregation lawsuit.<sup>9</sup> Low income black families who were currently or previously in Chicago’s public housing projects were eligible to receive housing vouchers that had to be used in neighborhoods that were 30% African American or less. Between 1976 and 1990, over 7000 families moved in the Chicago metro area; about half moved to mostly white suburbs and half moved to non-public housing city neighborhoods. The families were assigned to many different neighborhoods, allowing comparisons of outcomes for those who moved to mostly white suburbs with those who moved to other primarily minority city neighborhoods. Once families survived the initial disruption of moving, many developed ties to their middle

class neighbors and realized new prospects for employment and education, partly through neighbors’ assistance.<sup>10</sup> Recent research has shown that families tended to stay in more racially integrated neighborhoods over time<sup>11</sup> and that household heads placed in mostly white neighborhoods had lower welfare receipt and higher employment rates than those that moved to more segregated neighborhoods.<sup>12</sup> However, previous research on Gautreaux has not systematically identified direct links between the housing opportunity provided by the program and access to higher quality school districts.

As a result of the *Gautreaux* program, which is generally seen as “quasi-experimental,”<sup>13</sup> the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) implemented a more comprehensive demonstration study of the effects of offering families housing vouchers to live in more advantaged areas by executing a program with an experimental design in five cities. Between 1994 and 1998, the resulting Moving to

Opportunity program (MTO) assigned families at random to one of three groups: control group families (who received no subsidy), a Section 8 group (who received Housing Choice Vouchers with no geographic restrictions), and an experimental group (who received a voucher valid only in a low-poverty neighborhood, as well as assistance from housing counselors). Unfortunately, the interim impacts evaluation study (conducted four to seven years after families first moved) found no gains in academic performance for children.<sup>14</sup> However, most of the MTO moves were to other segregated neighborhoods and most children either did not switch school districts at all or went to schools similar to the ones they attended at the start of the study.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the MTO program does not provide a way to test whether large increases in neighborhood quality translate into large gains in school quality.

Our analysis of the Baltimore Mobility Program builds on this previous work by examining how moves to high opportunity neighborhoods improve access to high quality school environments. The Baltimore Mobility Program stems from a class action lawsuit filed by residents of Baltimore’s public housing projects, who

claimed that local and federal housing authorities had failed to dismantle the city’s racially segregated public housing system. In 1996, a partial consent decree was issued, as the first part of a larger anticipated remedy. As a result of this decree, 2000 special housing vouchers were ordered to be given to plaintiff class members (former or current public housing families and families on the waiting list for public housing or voucher assistance), to create housing opportunity in middle class, mostly white areas of Baltimore city and the adjacent counties.

Families were assisted in moving to census tracts that were less than 30% African American, less than 10% poor and where fewer than 5% of the housing units were public housing or project-based assisted units. In addition, the vouchers are regionally administered, so that families do not have to go through time-consuming portability procedures in order to use them in a different county. As of 2010, over 1800 families have moved with these assisted vouchers. These families and their mobility patterns are the basis for the data we use in this report.

Families who have moved with the Baltimore Mobility Program have experienced more dramatic changes in their neighborhood environment than MTO families. This move allows families to potentially overcome the constraints that keep African-American children in low performing, poor, and segregated schools. Beyond the provision of a housing subsidy to be used in resource rich communities, the Baltimore program helps low income minority families circumvent some of the structural barriers to housing and school access in a number

of other profound ways. Participating families are given extensive counseling and search assistance to find apartments in more affluent, mostly white communities. Counselors work with families to explain the benefits of moves to these new neighborhoods, teach them how to negotiate with landlords in the private rental market, and assist them with security deposits and information about resources in their new communities.

## FINDINGS

### Neighborhood Changes

Our analyses focus on data from 1,830 families who successfully relocated with the Baltimore program between 2002 and 2010. Almost all of the families were African-American and female-headed, and on average had two children. Table 1 shows that when they signed up for the program, these families were living in neighborhoods where almost one third of the population was below poverty, and the median household income was less than half that of the average neighborhood in Central Maryland. These neighborhoods were racially segregated, with unemployment rates of 16%, twice as high as the average for Central Maryland.

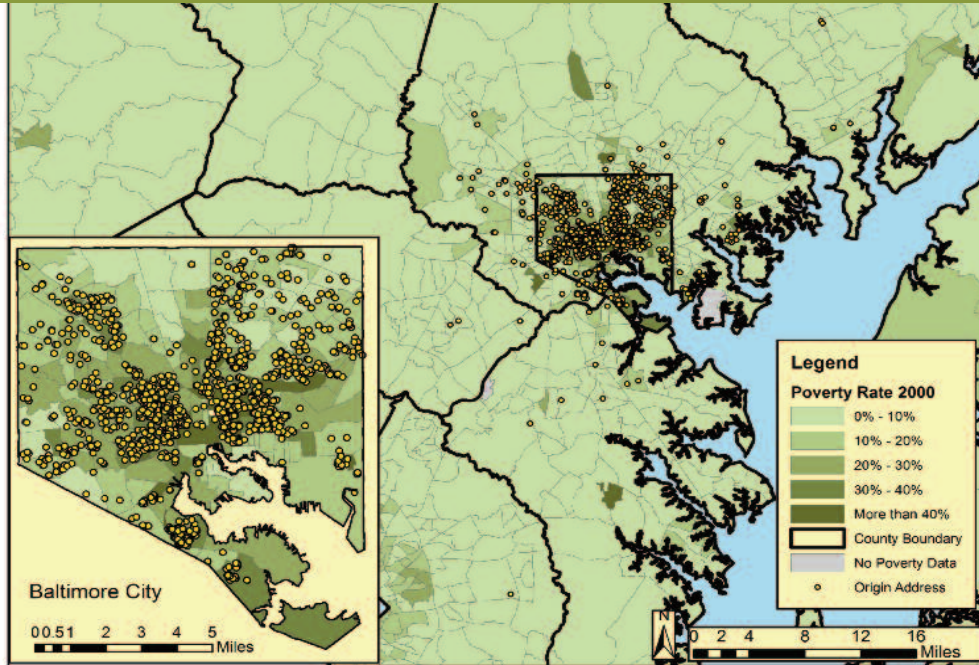
After they moved, Baltimore families were in much lower poverty neighborhoods, where their neighbors were more likely to have a bachelor’s degree and be employed. These neighborhoods were also mixed race, with median household incomes that were more than twice as high as those in their original neighborhoods. Another

**Table 1**

Neighborhood Characteristics (2005-09)	Baseline Neighborhood	First Move Neighborhood	Central MD Average (2005-09)
Percent White	17.14%	66.9%	62.2%
Percent Black	80.2%	25.0%	33.2%
Percent Below Poverty	30.2%	12.3%	12.1%
Percent with BA	13.3%	37.9%	31.1%
Median Household Income (2009)	\$30,676 (2009)	\$65,584	\$65,005
Unemployment Rate	16.0%	6.2%	7.5%

NOTE: Neighborhood data comes from the 2005-2009 American Community Survey. The program’s poverty threshold for the First Move Neighborhood was originally calculated using the 2000 Census, which helps explain why the average poverty level presented here (12.3%) is higher than the program’s threshold of 10%.

**Map 1: Origin Address for all Movers**



to appreciate the change that families experienced as a result of the program is to see the geographic patterns of their moves. Maps 1 and 2 show where families moved in the metropolitan area.

**School Opportunity Changes**

These moves out of segregated and poor neighborhoods have brought dramatic changes in the types of school environments children can access. Table 2 compares the local elementary schools children attended before moving and the characteristics of their local zone schools after moving. We can see that the move brought dramatic changes in average academic performance at the local

school—the percentage of students performing at levels considered proficient or higher on statewide tests increased by over 20% in reading and by almost 25% in math. The zone schools in the new neighborhoods also contain a higher percentage of classes taught by qualified teachers (defined as those with a degree or certificate in the subject that they are teaching). Whereas only 36.4% of classes are taught by qualified teachers in the average pre-move zone school, after the move almost three quarters of the classes in local schools are taught by qualified teachers. The final row of the table shows that the poverty rate of the local school children can now attend post-move (measured by the number of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch) is 50% lower

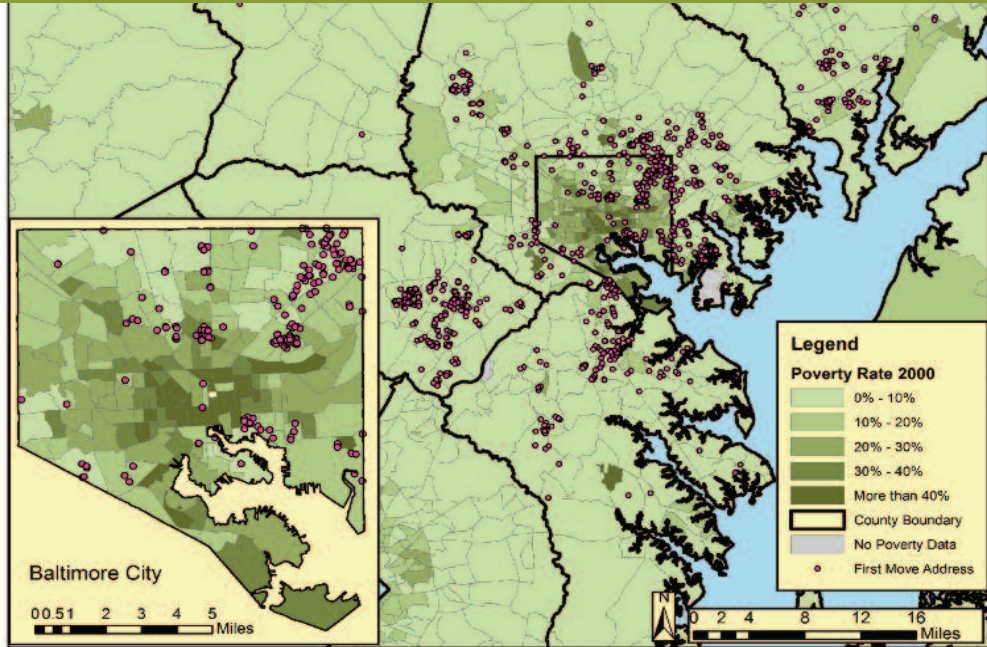
**Table 2**

Elementary School Characteristics	Baseline Neighborhood Zone School	Post Move Neighborhood Zone School
Students Proficient or Better in Math	44.8%	68.9%
Students Proficient or Better in Reading	54.2%	76.0%
Classes taught by Qualified Teachers	36.4%	74.8%
Free and Reduced Price Eligible Students	82.7%	32.5%

NOTE: All School Data are from 2004. Math and reading scores are based on student performance on the 3rd and 5th grade Maryland school assessments. Source: Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity.



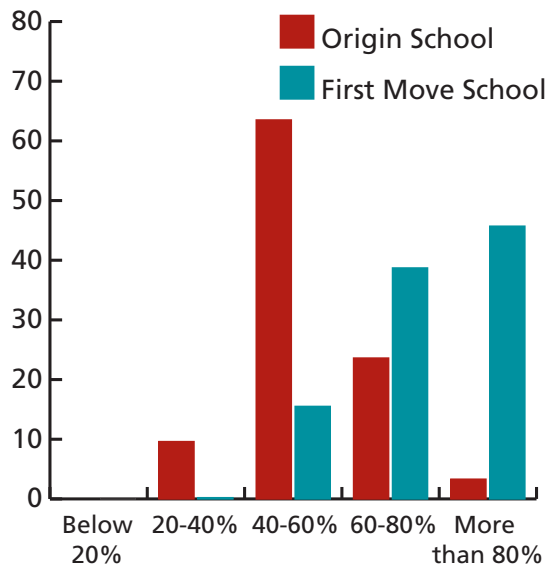
**Map 2: First Move Address for all Movers**



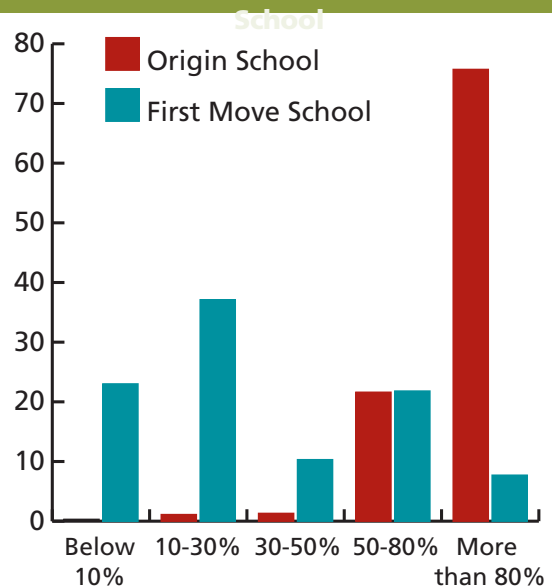
than the poverty rate in their original neighborhood schools.

Another way to examine these changes is to look at the distributions of school characteristics. Figures 1-3 show that some of the changes in schooling opportunity brought about by moves with the Baltimore program were even more dramatic than the averages in Table 2

**Figure 1: Percent Proficient or Higher in Reading at Local Elementary School**

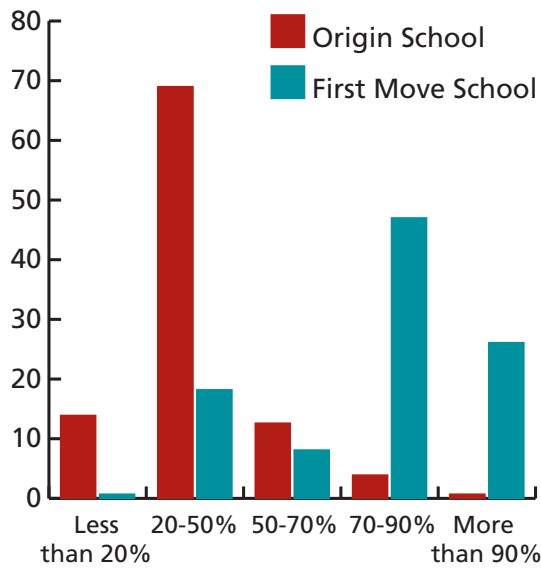


**Figure 2: Percent Free or Reduced Price Lunch Eligible in Local Elementary School**



suggest. For example, Figure 1 shows that the percentage of families living in areas where the local schools were high performing (over 80% of students proficient in reading), increased from only 3.3% before the move to more than 45% after the move. The darker bars in Figure 2 show that over three quarters of families were in school zones that were more than 80% poor before

**Figure 3: Percent of Classes Taught by Qualified Teachers**



the move, whereas after the move, the lighter bars show that nearly a quarter (23%) moved to zone schools that were less than 10% poor. Comparing the dark and light bars in Figure 3 shows that prior to the move, most families would have sent their children to zone schools where the majority of teachers were not qualified; after the move, the majority of families were in school zones where at least 70% of the classes were taught by qualified teachers, and more than a quarter of the families moved to school zones where 90% or more of the classes were taught by qualified teachers.

## CONCLUSION

Families who participated in the Baltimore Mobility Program experienced radical changes in their local

neighborhood contexts, moving from poor and segregated areas to mixed race, low poverty communities. In this paper, we look at the changes in educational opportunity that accompanied these moves. Given the demonstrated link between residential segregation and school quality, we would expect that giving families the opportunity to move to non-segregated, low poverty neighborhoods would increase access to higher quality school environments. As we show, this is exactly what has happened—the moves that families made with the program greatly increased the quality of the schools their children can attend, as measured by increases in the academic performance of the student body and teacher qualifications, as well as large decreases the poverty rate of the schools. These findings are significant for potential long-term outcomes from the program, as research suggests that middle class schools can positively influence student achievement.<sup>16</sup> For example, Schwartz’s recent findings that children from low-income families in Montgomery County, Maryland benefit from attending low-poverty schools might be

especially relevant to the Baltimore Mobility Program.<sup>17</sup> Children in the Baltimore Program have the opportunity to experience even more dramatic changes in school poverty level as a result of the program, which allows them to move from some of the poorest schools in the state to ones that are similar to those Schwartz found to be beneficial for increasing achievement.

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