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Three-City Study of Moving to Opportunity

Assisted Housing Mobility and the Success of Low-Income Minority Families: Lessons for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

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A change of address alone will never compensate for the major structural barriers low-skilled people face in our economy. But assisted housing mobility is enabling people to live in healthier, more secure environments, free of fear and the constant risk of victimization.

The court-ordered Gautreaux desegregation program and the federal Moving to Opportunity (MTO) demonstration were both assisted housing mobility initiatives, designed to help poor minority families living in distressed neighborhoods move to better locations in hopes of improving both their quality of life and their long-term life chances. Because reliable answers to questions about what works in public policy are hard to find, it is tempting to label experimental programs like these as either "successes" or "failures." Did they "prove" that using housing vouchers to relocate poor minority families "works" or not? As housing researchers with experience in both policy development and evaluation, we care deeply about what works, but we think this narrow framing is the wrong way to think about the lessons to date from Gautreaux and MTO.

In fact, Gautreaux "succeeded" in ways no one anticipated when it was launched, generating new optimism about the potential role of assisted housing mobility in helping black families escape poverty. These new ideas were further tested in the five-metropolitan MTO demonstration (directly inspired by Gautreaux); by other, nonexperimental mobility programs; and, to some extent, by HOPE VI. Considered together, these efforts represent a second round of experimentation with assisted housing mobility that is now generating important new lessons about how, where, and for whom to pursue the goal of expanding opportunity through wider housing choice. Therefore, this brief focuses not on whether Gautreaux or MTO "succeeded" or "failed," but on what their results teach us about how to make assisted housing mobility policies more effective in the future. In doing so, we draw upon a decade of research by a broad array of scholars; these sources are identified at the end of the brief for those interesting in further reading.

A change of address alone will never compensate for the major structural barriers low-skilled people face in our economy: the absence of crucial supports for work, such as universal health care and high-quality child care, or persistent inequalities in public education. And initiatives that promote housing mobility should not substitute for investing in the revitalization of distressed communities; both place-based and people-based strategies should be vigorously pursued. But assisted housing mobility has shown great promise—in particular, enabling people to live in healthier, more secure environments, free of fear and the constant risk of victimization. And we know how to build on this promise: the past dec-

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ade has generated many hard-won lessons about how to design and implement a next generation of "smarter" assisted housing mobility strategies that clearly belong on the short list of policy priorities to advance a new opportunity agenda in America.

Assisted housing mobility initiatives assume that families will *want* to move to better locations, given their motivations and the information about choices that are offered; they will be *able* to move, given counseling, search assistance, and other supports; they will be able to *stay* in new locations long enough to benefit from relocating, given their own resources and resilience as well as housing market conditions and post-move supports; they will be able to *take advantage* of new locations, given individual resilience and resources plus external supports; and—over time—many will experience *significant net benefits* compared with similar families that did not get the opportunity to move. This fundamental theory of change undergirds assisted housing mobility. What does the evidence to date tell us about the validity of these assumptions and their implications for efforts to design and implement effective policy?

Many Families Want to Move and Can—with Help

Contrary to the skepticism that the minority poor prefer to live among "their own," many low-income families—including blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and whites—will volunteer for the opportunity to move from high-poverty areas, typically in inner cities, to better neighborhoods in the same cities or in the surrounding suburbs. For example, more than 5,300 families from assisted housing developments in five cities—about one-quarter of those eligible—applied to participate in the MTO demonstration (Goering, Feins, and Richardson 2003); during most of the period that the Gautreaux program was under way, the number of applicants vastly exceeded the available slots.

Many, though certainly not all, of those who receive assistance successfully use the combination of a voucher and search assistance to find and rent housing in lower-poverty and less racially segregated communities. For example, the share of MTO families that successfully moved ranged from 34 percent in Chicago to 61 percent in Los Angeles (Goering et al. 2003). The families most likely to move successfully were those that were more motivated and more optimistic about their chances of success. Families with strong social ties to their neighbors or with many children or a disabled family member were less likely to lease up in the private market, and Hispanic families were less likely than black families to move successfully, net of other factors (Shroder 2003).

Mobility counseling and search assistance make a difference, not only in families'

The evidence presented here is drawn from rigorous research on three mobility interventions that have explicitly monitored outcomes for low-income families that received assistance to move from high-poverty to lower-poverty neighborhoods:

Gautreaux demonstration. Research has been conducted over many years (primarily by scholars at Northwestern University) on low-income families that received special-purpose housing vouchers, under court order, to move from poor, predominantly black neighborhoods in the city of Chicago to racially integrated suburban communities.

Moving to Opportunity (MTO) demonstration. Research has been conducted by researchers from a number of different institutions in a carefully controlled experiment to test the impacts of helping low-income families move from high-poverty assisted housing projects (in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles) to low-poverty neighborhoods throughout their metropolitan regions. Here, we rely not only on earlier qualitative and statistical studies but also on new evidence emerging from qualitative interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted among MTO families in Boston, Los Angeles, and New York.

HOPE VI program. Research has been conducted by the Urban Institute on outcomes for the original residents of five distressed public housing projects that are being demolished and replaced with mixed-income housing.

ability to find houses or apartments, but also in the types of neighborhoods to which they move. Families that receive housing vouchers without mobility assistance are not as successful in moving to low-poverty neighborhoods as those that receive assistance. In the MTO experiment, some families were randomly assigned to receive conventional housing vouchers, without any supplemental counseling or search assistance. These families moved to neighborhoods with significantly higher poverty and crime rates than the families that received both vouchers and search assistance and were restricted to using the vouchers in low-poverty areas (Orr et al. 2003).

Ongoing research highlights the importance of the criteria used to identify suitable destination neighborhoods for participating families. The Gautreaux demonstration—and subsequent court-ordered desegregation remedies—required minority families to move to majority-white neighborhoods. MTO families, on the other hand, were required to use their vouchers in census tracts with poverty rates below 10 percent. Nationally, the vast majority of these tracts are located in majority-white, stable, suburban communities (like Gautreaux's destination neighborhoods). But although many MTO families successfully moved to low-poverty neighborhoods, most remained in the same central-city jurisdiction and moved to neighborhoods that were majority-minority and, in many cases, becoming poorer over time.[1]

These initial MTO relocation outcomes may reflect the tendency of program counselors (and participants themselves) to steer toward areas where landlords were known to accept federal housing vouchers, or the many challenges involved in moving to majority-white communities in the suburbs. There is also good reason to believe that providing more "hands on" help with housing searches makes a difference, especially in tight housing markets. In the Gautreaux program's early years, counselors searched for housing *on behalf* of their clients and helped broker agreements between landlords and the assisted families. Although MTO counseling practices varied across sites, they tended to leave more responsibility for search and negotiation in the families' hands. We return to these issues below, but for now, we underline the strong possibility that MTO's specific failure to move a large number of families to more stable, racially diverse neighborhoods in higher-performing suburban school districts may limit benefits for families over the long term.

Future mobility programs should rethink the criteria used to define eligible destination neighborhoods as "opportunity areas." Both racial composition and poverty rate are in fact proxies for attributes that make a neighborhood a good place to live and, more specifically, a promising place for low-income parents to raise their children. One possibility would be to target neighborhoods that are far away from distressed, high-poverty (and majority-minority) neighborhoods, as Gautreaux's suburban destinations were. This would eliminate many neighborhoods that are in the path of racial or economic transition.

Moving farther would also make it more difficult for participating families, especially teens, to return to the old neighborhood regularly. Although this might isolate some families from key institutional resources (service providers or civic groups) and social resources (support networks of relatives and friends), it would also distance them from risks in the old neighborhood. What families gain and lose depends very much on where the risks and resources in their lives were located at the outset. Contrary to the folk wisdom about cohesive neighborhoods of poor people, some mobility program participants report no support networks at all in their starting-point neighborhoods; their useful ties were elsewhere. Others had very weak links to institutions in those neighborhoods but were deeply embedded in networks of risky kin, with substance abuse, chronic unemployment, and other problems that remained very burdensome.

An alternative to the distant-moves approach would be to focus explicitly on identifying destination neighborhoods that provide access to specific assets or opportunities, such as high-performing schools or concentrations of entry-level jobs. Focusing on the positive qualities that distressed inner-city communities lack could significantly strengthen the performance of assisted housing mobility programs. And it could avoid the kind of legal challenge that explicitly race-based programs are certain to face given recent Supreme Court decisions.

In addition to the challenge of defining desirable destination neighborhoods, important questions remain about how

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widely participating families must be dispersed in their new locations. There are strong arguments against reconcentrating large numbers of families in just a few housing developments or census tracts, but there are also benefits to helping people sustain networks of friendship and support with people who live close by. Some mobility counseling programs ask successful participants from previous years to host small gatherings of prospective movers, enabling families to get to know each other and to learn more about communities to which they might move. Others encourage small numbers of participants to move together to the same building or subdivision in an opportunity-rich community, so they feel less lonely and isolated. In effect, such mini-enclaves combine the strengths of "supportive housing" (where families with similar backgrounds receive multiple services) with the advantages of a healthy neighborhood environment. In sum, there are several promising alternatives for targeting place—defining better locations and relocating families to them—and future policy and research should reflect that fact.

Stability is a prerequisite for productive engagement by low-income families in unfamiliar new communities, a likely precondition for realizing many of the opportunities these communities have to offer.

Staying There, Not Just Getting There

Many benefits of relocating to opportunity-rich areas hinge on sustained exposure to better resources and lower levels of risk. But within just a few years of their initial moves to low-poverty neighborhoods, many MTO families had moved again (in some cases more than once)—and typically to poorer communities (Comey, Briggs, and Weismann 2008). In contrast, long-run evidence on Gautreaux participants indicates that most of those who moved to majority-white suburban communities did not move back to poor, racially segregated neighborhoods, and that initial placement in a racially diverse, low-poverty area was a good predictor of moves to similar areas later on (DeLuca and Rosenbaum 2003).

Why are so few MTO movers able to stay in low-poverty areas? Is it dislike of the new neighborhoods or feelings of isolation from relatives and friends left behind? For the most part, no. The major reasons for second and third moves were rent increases and problems with landlords about the housing unit, factors associated with "involuntary" moves (Comey et al. 2008). Though some families found their new neighborhoods uncomfortable socially, there is no evidence that dissatisfaction with the initial placement areas was a widespread problem or that movers suffered a general loss of social support or socializing time with relatives or friends. To the contrary, rates of neighborhood satisfaction were very high overall, and participants indicated that they usually socialized where their kin and close friends lived, though doing so was toughest for those without reliable access to a car.

This finding underscores the importance of helping families stay out, not just get out, of risky places, focusing in particular on factors associated with involuntary mobility. Stability is a prerequisite for productive engagement by low-income families in unfamiliar new communities, a likely precondition for realizing many of the opportunities these communities have to offer. Pre-move counseling should seek the best possible initial placements for families, not the quickest placements, which may be cheaper in the near term and may reflect the use-it-or-lose-it pressure associated with time limits on search. In addition, post-move counseling may be needed to help resolve problems with landlords and their units that trigger tenant dissatisfaction and decisions to move. Access to social supports (both formal and informal) is important regardless of the kind of neighborhood one lives in, but such access is particularly challenging for those without reliable cars. This challenge is worth addressing with smarter mobility strategies, a point we return to below. Also, where rapid rent increases in particular markets are a significant factor, flexibility in the management of the voucher program (such as granting "exception rents") can help and is well tested. And when subsequent moves are unavoidable, initiatives like Chicago's Housing Opportunity Program show that second-move counseling can help families stay in lower-poverty areas (Cunningham and Sawyer 2005).

Finally, supply-side strategies, which expand the stock of housing that remains affordable over time, often managed by "social landlords" (nonprofits or socially responsible private firms), are an important structural solution, especially since many suburbs have little or no history of developing affordable rentals. Production subsidies make the most sense when they enable low-income families to live in better neighborhoods, when housing markets are tight (and affordable units scarce), or when

the availability of affordable housing is shrinking because previously low-income neighborhoods are gentrifying. Although experimentation with housing mobility and its lessons has been dominated by voucher-based or "demand-side" strategies for the past decade or more—in part because both the Gautreaux and MTO programs were voucher based—it is essential now to also address the adequacy of affordable housing supply, and so-called *unit-based* mobility strategies.

Making the Most of New Neighborhoods

For low-income families that are willing and able to relocate to better neighborhoods, and then able to stay in them "long enough," there is the question of making the most of new places—the final key to realizing significant benefits. In-depth qualitative interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with MTO families reveal that the ways in which they *use* new neighborhoods hinge on the structure of their social relations, specific family needs that may or may not be met near the home, access to other places that are significant in their lives, and levels of trust toward new neighbors. Some families and individuals cope resourcefully with the disadvantages of even the most distressed environments, while others are likely to encounter serious problems regardless of the neighborhoods in which they live. Although we still have much to learn about how families actually make use of new locations, research to date clearly establishes that assisted housing mobility yields dramatic improvements in perceived neighborhood quality for participating families.

In particular, families that successfully move end up in dramatically safer neighborhoods. Moving with an MTO voucher (to low-poverty neighborhoods) produced a 30.3 percentage point increase in perceptions of safety (Orr et al. 2003). Families moving with a regular voucher also experienced significant—though smaller—gains in perceived safety, and 8 of 10 HOPE VI families that moved with vouchers describe their new neighborhood as safer than their neighborhoods of origin. Families place tremendous value on enhanced safety, telling interviewers what a relief it is not to worry constantly about the threat of violence, including indiscriminate or "random" violence in poor neighborhoods left behind. Parents emphasize the freedom to let children play outside and to come and go from the home, free from fear. For example, one MTO mover reported

> you can wake up every day and we're not worried about seeing anybody getting shot and no gang members, nothing like that and it's quiet and it's cool and calm up here. In the city there's a lot of activities that's going on that's negative. Here there's a lot of positive.

These improvements in neighborhood environment can contribute to significant improvements in the well-being of both adults and children.

Mental and physical health. Among the strongest findings to date from the MTO demonstration are results showing substantial improvements in the health of women and girls who moved to lower-poverty neighborhoods. In particular, adult obesity is significantly lower among those who moved, a noteworthy effect given the national attention now focused on the dangers of obesity for long-term health. MTO parents (who are mostly single mothers) and adolescent girls (age 12 to 19) also enjoy significant improvements in mental health, including reductions in psychological distress and depression, and feelings of calm and peacefulness (Orr et al. 2003). These gains are on par with mental health gains typical under the most effective psychotherapeutic treatments available. And mothers' mental health is increasingly recognized as a key risk factor in the development of babies and toddlers.

Adolescent behavior. In addition to mental health improvements, moving to a lower-poverty neighborhood is reducing crime, delinquency, and risky behavior among adolescent girls, though not among boys (Orr et al. 2003). In the distressed and violent communities from which they moved, many of these girls were sexual targets for older boys and men. They suffered from sexual harassment, pressure to have sex, and even rape. Escaping from these environments appears to offer a tremendous sense of relief and freedom for adolescent girls, not only contributing to short-term gains in health and well-being but also potentially enabling them to stay in school, make career plans, and postpone childbearing over the longer term.

So far, there is no evidence that boys have enjoyed comparable benefits from

mobility, at least not within the same time frames. They may even suffer setbacks relative to counterparts in public housing. One possible explanation, which researchers have not been able to confirm or reject as yet, is that black and Hispanic boys moving to integrated or predominantly white neighborhoods are not engaging in any more criminal behavior but are being arrested more due to racial profiling or higher rates of detecting crime in low-poverty areas (a known pattern nationally). Another possibility is that some boys respond differently to the loneliness, fears, or boredom associated with relocation: new peers and expectations, a loss of familiar activities, the felt need to act tough to gain respect, and more. Parents also tend to "manage" (monitor and discipline) boys and girls differently. Finally, forthcoming ethnographic field research reveals that some young people (including girls as well as boys) who get in trouble are embedded in risky peer networks made up largely of relatives, as well as gangs in the neighborhoods left behind (Popkin, Leventhal, and Weismann 2008).

School success. Gautreaux research suggested striking benefits for children whose families moved to suburban school districts. Although sample sizes were small, it appeared that these children were more likely to complete high school, take college-track courses, attend college, and enter the workforce than children from similar families who moved to neighborhoods within Chicago. To date, there is no evidence that MTO moves have led to better educational outcomes, possibly because so few children are attending significantly better schools in advantaged school districts (or because it may be too early to detect benefits).

In fact, roughly 7 of 10 MTO families sent their children to their assigned school, whether in the immediate neighborhood or some larger, administratively defined attendance zone. In other words, they did not make a school choice beyond the choice of a neighborhood. This proportion roughly matches the national average for public school children. For the 30 percent who were school "choosers," informed choices were often hard to make. Some parents are unaware of the options available in their new neighborhoods, in part because most rely on limited information resources, such as word-of-mouth referrals from similarly situated relatives or friends. In addition, many parents emphasize perceived safety, discipline, and convenience as indicators of a "good" school more than evidence of academic supports (such as small class sizes, strong counseling, and tutoring) and achievement. Not surprisingly, since they were fleeing some of the nation's most unsafe neighborhoods and schools, these "safety-first" parents placed highest priority on ensuring that their children would be safe at school—even, in a handful of cases, if this meant staying at the school in the original neighborhood. Finally, a few parents thought their kids would benefit more from the stability of staying in the same school—and the same after-school care arrangements—than from moving to a new and unfamiliar school. These parents recognized moving itself as disruptive and wanted school to serve as a source of social and emotional stability in their children's lives (Ferryman et al. 2008).

Employment. The current evidence on how mobility affects adult employment and earnings is mixed and still somewhat inconclusive. Over the long term, Gautreaux families that moved out of segregated and distressed central-city neighborhoods achieved greater employment success than their counterparts that stayed. Specifically, employment rates were higher among Gautreaux participants who moved to the suburbs than among those who moved within the city of Chicago. And recent research using administrative data on wages and welfare receipt finds that Gautreaux women who moved to predominantly white neighborhoods with moderate to high resources spent significantly more time employed and less time on welfare (Keels et al. 2005).

MTO results are not yet as clear. The interim evaluation found no significant impacts on employment, earnings, or receipt of public assistance across the five demonstration sites. When results are stratified by site, however, we see significant increases in rates of employment in Los Angeles and in earnings in New York. In addition, exploratory analysis of variations in employment effects for different types of MTO participants suggest that women under age 40 may experience employment gains after the first year. And nonexperimental analysis finds that, net of other factors, MTO adults who moved to low-poverty neighborhoods in the suburbs earned $75 a week more than those in con-

trol neighborhoods (Cove, Turner, and Briggs 2008).

Why might relocation contribute to better employment outcomes only in some cities, for some categories of families, or in some types of neighborhoods? Very few MTO families cited "getting a job" or "being near my job" as their most important reason for wanting to move; families were primarily motivated to escape unsafe areas. Further, it is by no means clear that most new locations offer better access to jobs—despite their lower poverty rates and dramatically improved safety. In fact, geographic analysis suggests that MTO families in Los Angeles and Chicago moved to neighborhoods that were no closer to low-skilled job opportunities than those they left behind (Cove et al. 2008). Struggling at the bottom of the housing and job markets, in a nation that does not provide high-quality, affordable child care to every working parent who needs it, many MTO families have found it hard to line up a secure, three-way spatial match: access to child care, which often comes from relatives and friends, an apartment that stays affordable, and a reasonably secure job. This leads to instability, more frequent moves and job changes, and difficult commutes. Finally, some of those who are not working face multiple barriers that are not directly affected by location, such as disabling illnesses and limited skills.

The story of how residential mobility may affect employment prospects for the next generation is still unfolding. Some MTO youth report a dramatic impact, from living and forming peer relationships in new areas, on their ability to present themselves in ways that employers find appealing. They speak of a "ghetto style" in their old neighborhoods versus new styles to which they have had to adapt. Although adapting creates emotional strains, the youth themselves see the value in being able to deal with a wider range of people and situations, using a broader "cultural toolkit" (Cove et al. 2008).

Low Risk, Untapped Potential

Despite the tremendous attention—and controversy—assisted housing mobility initiatives have engendered, they are in fact tiny. They represent significant untapped potential relative to any risk they may pose to clients and communities. Every year, thousands of low-income families receive federally funded housing vouchers, but almost none receive the kind of mobility counseling and search assistance that were offered to Gautreaux and MTO volunteers. And while locational outcomes for conventional voucher holders are certainly better than for residents of public housing, the program falls far short of the policy vision of "a decent home and suitable living environment" for every American family, particularly for minority households.

Why hasn't the promise of assisted housing mobility been applied more broadly? Housing assistance programs and the mostly low-income clients they serve suffer the deep and persistent stigmas tied to minorities, the poor, and the receipt of means-tested aid from government. Poor neighborhoods anchored by public housing projects conjure up powerful stereotypes of ghetto pathology and a lack of motivation to "play by the rules" and work to get ahead. The rental voucher program, still referred to as "Section 8" by landlords and neighbors, likewise is targeted by negative stigmas that lead to oppositional politics (NIMBY-ism) and unwillingness to rent to individual voucher holders. Some neighbors assume that poorly managed apartment buildings are "Section 8 buildings" even when no voucher holders live there. And vouchers aside, many localities act through land use policy to exclude the types of housing that would be affordable to families with low and moderate incomes, often citing fears of community decline.

Yet champions of voucher-based housing opportunity have evidence on their side that assisted families will not undermine the well-being of the communities to which they move. Some research has raised concerns about possible negative effects of some kinds of subsidized housing—for example, where poorly managed buildings are located in high-value neighborhoods. But the most careful study conducted to date finds that the arrival of a voucher family actually triggers a slight increase in sales prices for homes within a 500-foot radius and has no effect on sales prices of homes farther away (Galster, Tatian, and Smith 1999). On the other hand, when a large number of apartments in the same immediate vicinity are occupied by voucher recipients, nearby sales prices decline.

Many MTO families have found it hard to line up a secure, three-way spatial match: access to child care, which often comes from relatives and friends, an apartment that stays affordable, and a reasonably secure job.

But what kinds of neighborhoods were affected in these ways? The positive price effects all occurred in neighborhoods that were predominantly white, high valued, with rising sales prices. No negative effects were found in neighborhoods of this type. Instead, all the negative price effects occurred in minority neighborhoods and moderate- to low-value neighborhoods with declining values. Other research also confirms that smaller-scale, better designed, and better managed subsidized housing does not lead to neighborhood decline or resegregation and, indeed, can contribute to neighborhood upgrading. It is when subsidized housing is clustered in lower-cost, higher-poverty, minority neighborhoods that it can be detrimental to the receiving communities.

Next-Generation Policy

What does the evidence suggest for next-generation policy and management of assisted housing mobility initiatives? First, there is a strong case for experimenting more with targeting, both of people and of place. Efforts to date at targeting people have been based on largely unexamined assumptions about participants' *readiness to move*—level of functioning vis-à-vis the demands of relocation and capacity to make the most of new locations. The analogous concept of *readiness to work* helped transform the way we approached the policy challenges of chronic unemployment and welfare dependency, but housing policy has been much slower to address the diversity of the client pool in the context of poverty deconcentration. We are particularly encouraged by results of more intensive interventions for the most disadvantaged, such as supportive housing. Future efforts might target the move-ready and help prepare others to move, through graduated steps.

Even a conservative cost-benefit analysis points to a compelling net benefit for programs that enable parents and children to function in much safer neighborhoods and schools.

As for targeting places, we have made a case for defining destination areas (targets for relocation) through tangible indicators of opportunity, such as access to entry-level jobs or high-performing schools, rather than area poverty rate or racial makeup alone. The more general point is that different types of neighborhoods can serve different types of families well and that low poverty rate—the criterion on which policy debates focused in the 1990s, given concerns about the concentrated minority poverty that characterizes inner-city America—is too limited a proxy for the community features that matter most.

In addition to better targeting, *performance management* is crucial and overdue. To be effective, assisted housing mobility programs hinge on a chain of cooperative action by landlords, tenants, housing agencies, and sometimes others. In plain terms, this element of the nation's opportunity agenda is particularly vulnerable to the strong-idea-weakly-implemented problem. The early implementation problems of some MTO sites, and the significant difference in locational outcomes between Gautreaux and MTO, illustrate this powerfully. So does the large-scale, hasty relocation of many severely disadvantaged families from the high-rise projects demolished in the early rounds of HOPE VI. Understaffed counseling programs and unstable placements, where families "bounce" from neighborhood to neighborhood, are two of the critical pitfalls.

Accountability is key, and so is good information to guide implementation. Both point to the need for clear and consistent performance management frameworks. The next generation of mobility programs should establish specific targets for *inputs* (such as adequate counseling staff, information technology, transportation supports), *process* (core activities, such as screening and enrollment, counseling), and *outputs* (placements and more), demanding that implementing agencies carefully develop mechanisms for reaching those targets. Public agencies, watchdog groups and the media, and the courts (as appropriate) should hold the implementers accountable for meeting the targets in a timely way.

In addition, although we clearly cannot afford to make every mobility program a controlled research experiment, it is essential that we continue to gather and analyze information about interim and long-term outcomes for families that move. In the short term, for example, are family members able to access transportation, health care, schools, and jobs in their new neighborhoods? And in the longer term, do they experience improvements in health, education, employment, and income? Collecting data on interim and long-term outcomes is considerably more challenging (and expensive) than collecting basic data on inputs, process, and outputs. One strategy would be to track a sample of participating families over time,

interviewing them at regular intervals using standardized survey instruments.

Mobility initiatives have thus far focused on helping families relocate the first time—on helping the inner-city poor *get* to better places, not helping them to stay there. Post-move counseling and second (or *n*th)-move counseling show promise, as do "welcome wagon" links to community institutions or other supports for successful adaptation to new places. But the challenge of stably housing low-income families in opportunity areas also underscores the importance of expanding the supply of rental housing that is and remains affordable. This means better-funded production and acquisition programs, according to market conditions and local institutional capacity, to widen the geography of affordable housing.

Finally, while delivering on the promise of mobility itself should be policymakers' first priority, future policy should also offer "mobility plus" wherever possible. As our discussion of MTO's limited effects on employment and education suggests, we can and should link rental housing subsides and counseling to workforce development, reliable transportation (through "car voucher" programs to promote access by low-income families that move to car-reliant communities), reliable child care, informed school choice, and other family-strengthening supports. The very effective and well documented New Hope and Jobs-Plus programs show the way on these fronts. These tools would compensate significantly for the limits of a relocation-only intervention for the inner-city poor, addressing families' varied needs and helping families take maximum advantage of new and better locations.

In sum, a new address is no cure-all for the challenges facing low-income families and their children in the economic and political environment of the 21st century. And public policies must invest more (and more effectively) to restore the safety and vitality of inner-city neighborhoods so the families that choose to remain there can thrive. Nonetheless, experimentation and research to date demonstrate that assisted housing mobility offers tremendous promise—with low risk—and offer lessons about how to make the next generation of initiatives smarter. Even a conservative cost-benefit analysis, using standards widely accepted by economists for valuing health and mental health gains, points to a compelling net benefit for programs that enable parents and children to function in much safer neighborhoods and schools. It's time to expand assisted housing mobility as part of a larger opportunity agenda for the nation.

Note

1. In addition, as discussed further below, many MTO families made subsequent moves rather than remaining in the neighborhoods to which they initially relocated.

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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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