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Why Did the Moving to Opportunity Experiment Not Get Young People into Better Schools?

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Abstract

Educational failure is one of the costliest and most visible problems associated with ghetto poverty. We explore whether housing assistance that helps low-income families move to better neighborhoods can also improve access to good schools. Research on the Gautreaux housing desegregation program indicated significant, long-term educational benefits, yet results from the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment showed no measurable impacts on school outcomes for the experimental group. We use interviews and ethnographic fieldwork to explore this puzzle.

Most MTO families did not relocate to communities with substantially better schools, and those who did often moved again after a few years. Where parents had meaningful school choices, these were typically driven by poor information obtained from insular social networks or by cultural logic centered on avoiding ghetto-type school insecurity and disorder, not garnering academic opportunity. Those factors may not shift if poor families with less educated parents are served by a relocation-only strategy.

Keywords: Education; Housing assistance programs; Mobility

Introduction

Can helping low-income families meet the high cost of housing and move to better neighborhoods lead to better school outcomes for children? Racial segregation and high housing costs compel many low-income families to live

in high-poverty, high-risk neighborhoods, typically in distressed inner cities or older suburbs. In such areas, children and adults alike tend to have poor educational and labor outcomes, and they report some of the worst physical and mental health in the nation (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber 1997; Ellen and Turner 2003; Orr et al. 2003). Because most public school enrollments mirror neighborhood segregation, schools in these communities face severe disadvantages and tend to show higher failure rates, as well as more severe safety problems, than schools in other areas.

Federal housing policy is implicated in these patterns: Millions of families living in public housing or using housing vouchers in large urban areas live in these distressed neighborhoods (Cunningham and Droesch 2005; Goering, Kamely, and Richardson 1994; Newman and Schnare 1997). Yet, officially, it is the long-standing aim of the nation's housing policy to ensure "a decent home" as well as "a suitable living environment" for all families, and the importance of the neighborhood environment, and of quality schools as a part of the package, has been reaffirmed by numerous national commissions.¹

With the creation of the federal rental voucher program in 1974 (now called Housing Choice Vouchers), families receiving government housing assistance were, in principle, able to use their subsidy in the private rental market to move away from poor or high-risk communities. While reducing severe rent burden was the main goal of the program (Khadduri 2005), policy makers and advocates have repeatedly emphasized access to better neighborhoods as well—especially with the focus on deconcentrating poverty that followed public and scholarly debate over a socially and economically isolated "underclass" in inner-city neighborhoods (Goetz 2003; Orr et al. 2003; Wilson 1987). But studies of voucher outcomes suggest that the program does relatively little to either encourage or enable families to live in more resource-rich areas; that many low-income families, especially racial minorities, face major barriers to doing so, such as search constraints and refusal by landlords to accept vouchers (Basolo and Nguyen 2005; Newman and Schnare 1997; Orr et al. 2003; Pashup et al. 2005; Pendall 2000); and that these families do not wish, in all cases, to relocate to unfamiliar areas where they have few social supports.

For these reasons, innovative assisted mobility programs target better locational outcomes through vouchers or other program tools, and there is some evidence that these programs also help produce better social outcomes,

¹See the final report of the Bipartisan Millennial Housing Commission (2002), for example, and the history in Goering (2005). The pledge to ensure "a decent home and a suitable living environment" is part of the Housing Act of 1949 (see Newman and Schnare 1997).

such as improved health, education, and economic self-sufficiency, for children and their families. In 1994, largely on the basis of encouraging evidence on educational and other outcomes from the Gautreaux housing desegregation program in Chicago, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) used \$70 million from a special congressional appropriation to launch the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment in metropolitan Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. MTO, which serves a more disadvantaged population than Gautreaux did, aims to rigorously test the idea that relocating from high- to low-poverty areas will improve the lives of disadvantaged children and families receiving housing assistance. MTO is the first randomized housing experiment to test this important idea.

Yet four to seven years into the MTO program, there were no generalized (all-site) treatment effects on school outcomes (including achievement), and only modest differences in school quality, for children whose families received the offer to move out of high-poverty public housing and into low-poverty neighborhoods (Orr et al. 2003). (About half of these families relocated successfully.) We use qualitative interviews and ethnographic fieldwork at the Boston, Los Angeles, and New York sites to explore this puzzling finding. We focus on the school choice decisions of MTO parents, which have not been studied carefully before, but we discuss their choice of housing location as well. Both are crucial factors in the experiment's effects on education, and ours is the first study we know of to examine school choice in the specific context of an assisted housing relocation program. We do not analyze educational effort, achievement, or attainment, but rather the upstream mediator of *exposure to particular types of schools*.

Our results and policy recommendations address the important links among housing assistance, housing and neighborhood choices, school options and choices, and the educational outcomes of low-income, mostly minority children in elementary and secondary schools. More specifically, these results also suggest the potential—and the limits—of a relocation-only strategy to change educational options and outcomes for some of the nation's most severely disadvantaged children and their families.

Background: How might the neighborhood environment affect school outcomes?

A substantial body of research has found that residents of distressed inner-city neighborhoods have significantly poorer life outcomes, on average, than those who live in low-poverty areas. Research suggests several ways that poor neighborhoods could contribute to poor outcomes, including less effective public services, weaker job networks, physical and social isolation from

suburban job growth (the spatial mismatch hypothesis), norms and pressure that encourage risky behavior by young people and adults alike, the absence of role models, and related factors (Ellen and Turner 2003; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). For some of these pathways, people who share a neighborhood must interact and create a *social world* for influence to operate, but for other pathways, place may matter simply as a *location* that provides more or less exposure to opportunities—such as entry-level jobs—or risks—such as being victimized by crime (Briggs 2004).

These factors suggest, conversely, how moving to a better neighborhood might influence educational achievement, for example, by giving children access to more resource-rich and high-performing schools with better instruction and supports, as well as positive peer groups made up of young people who are more confident that education will pay off for them. These positive pathways might lead to healthier aspirations, better attendance, more study time, or other educational effort and, in turn, to better attainment (school completion) and achievement (as measured by grades and test scores; see the review in Orr et al. 2003).

However, we must also consider how moving to new neighborhoods and schools could have negative consequences. For example, low-income children might respond negatively to competition with more advantaged peers (Jencks and Mayer 1990; Rosenbaum 1995), or teachers might single out the newcomers for sanctions (Carter 2003, Skiba et al. 2000). Also, some research indicates that moving itself, even to a more resource-rich environment, can be disruptive for children's education and social development and that multiple moves can be even more damaging (Pribesh and Downey 1999; see the review in Sanbonmatsu et al. 2006).

The research that has most directly informed the MTO demonstration, as well as efforts to evaluate it, is a series of studies on the outcomes of families that participated in the Gautreaux housing desegregation program in metropolitan Chicago. The Gautreaux program enabled about 7,000 very low income black families, many of them living in Chicago's notorious public housing high rises, to move to mostly white, middle-income suburban communities with much better performing public schools.² In general, Gautreaux parents who moved to the suburbs reported more concerned

²Those eligible for the Gautreaux program included current public housing residents, former residents (including those who had lived in Chicago public housing as children), and households on the waiting list for housing assistance (Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum 2000). By contrast, MTO was limited to families currently living in high-poverty public housing developments in the five study sites. There is evidence that the MTO population was significantly more disadvantaged at the time of enrollment in the mid-1990s than Gautreaux families had been in the late 1970s (Pashup et al. 2005).

teachers with more resources to help their children, as well as student peers who worked harder, were less disruptive, and were more likely to expect to go on to college than counterparts left behind in Chicago's inner-city schools. After nearly a decade, follow-up research found that many of these suburban movers struggled for a time with higher standards and unfamiliar cultural expectations in their new schools; children's grades also dropped in the short to medium term—in part because standards were so much higher than they had been in inner-city public schools. Yet compared with a second group of movers who stayed in Chicago (and whose children stayed in its public schools), the children of suburban movers were more likely to have completed high school and gone on to college (Kaufman and Rosenbaum 1992; Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum 2000).

Gautreaux was not a controlled experiment but rather took advantage of the “natural experiment” created by the program. Initially, the evaluation did not follow families that failed to successfully move to the suburbs or moved out and then back to the inner city, making it difficult to attribute effects to location (Orr et al. 2003; Popkin et al. 2000). But the study's compelling, positive findings were a major factor in the 1992 decision by Congress to authorize the MTO demonstration.

Why launch a social experiment? What is MTO testing?

Those who study neighborhood effects on child and family well-being struggle with the fact that families are not randomly sorted into neighborhoods. Because different families make different housing choices, life outcomes—and the processes that shape them—may reflect key traits of families and not necessarily the influences of their neighborhood environment. To further complicate the puzzle, important neighborhood influences appear to be managed differently by different types of families, meaning that family and neighborhood traits interact and may shift over time (Ellen and Turner 2003; Furstenberg et al. 1999). In general, a randomized social experiment is the best available way to determine the impact of neighborhoods over and above family-level influence. Because MTO participants were randomly assigned to treatment groups, the effects of the treatment (intervention) should be attributable to the experiment rather than to the characteristics of the families (Orr et al. 2003).

In MTO, local public housing agencies invited very low income residents of public housing in high-poverty neighborhoods of Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York to apply for a voucher that could be used only in a low-poverty neighborhood. Over 5,300 families, most of them black

or Hispanic, applied, and just over 4,600 met basic eligibility requirements. These families were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups:

1. A *control group*. Families retained their public housing unit and received no new assistance.
2. A *Section 8 comparison group*. Families received the standard counseling and voucher subsidy for use in the private market.
3. An *experimental group*. Families received relocation counseling and search assistance to help them move to low-poverty neighborhoods. They also received a voucher that could be used only in a low-poverty neighborhood (one that had a poverty rate of less than 10 percent as of the 1990 census), with the requirement that the family live there for at least a year.

Of the 1,820 families assigned to the experimental group, just under half (47 percent or 860) found a suitable apartment and moved successfully (leased up), becoming “compliers.”

But what, in fact, is the treatment, and what, therefore, is MTO testing? Like other social experiments, MTO has evolved in the real world and not under controlled laboratory conditions. And several developments over the decade since random assignment have made MTO a less-than-pure test of neighborhood effects on families. First, more than half of the experimental group (53 percent) did not successfully move to low-poverty areas at the outset. While these families are still part of MTO’s tracking and results, they did not receive the intended treatment. While outcomes for each subgroup (compliers and noncompliers) can, of course, be reported separately, public discussions of the results can all too easily obscure nuances of experimental design and analysis, including the huge factor of program utilization or success rate. In plainer terms, it is important to distinguish the question of how effective or ineffective the treatment is for those who receive it from the question of what shapes access and successful utilization in the first place.³

Second, locational gains have eroded in at least some dimensions. At the interim mark four to seven years after random assignment, two-thirds

³The Gautreaux Two housing mobility program in Chicago has served a population with levels of disadvantage comparable to those seen with MTO (rather than with the original Gautreaux program) and, like MTO, imposed certain locational restrictions. Researchers explain Gautreaux Two’s relatively low lease-up rate (36 percent) in terms of external factors (a tight rental market, discrimination against minorities and voucher holders, and bureaucratic delays), as well as internal factors (limited program comprehension, large household size, and health problems) (Pashup et al. 2005). These and other barriers, including limited time and transportation, appear to have limited lease-ups in MTO (Orr et al. 2003; Shroder 2002) and the regular voucher program (Popkin and Cunningham 1999).

of those who successfully moved to low-poverty neighborhoods had moved again, some time after the required year of residence; these families typically moved to poorer neighborhoods, most frequently citing problems with their housing unit or landlord (Orr et al. 2003). After the initial placement, even families in the experimental group did not receive additional relocation counseling or other assistance, so there was nothing to specifically encourage them to choose another low-poverty neighborhood when they moved. The larger point is that many of the hoped-for social effects of better neighborhoods—forging useful ties to new peers and community institutions, for example—depend on exposure over time, a process that repeat moving undermines, that a trajectory of moving to poorer places likely erodes, and that a move to only moderately better school communities limited from the outset.

Third, the low-poverty areas that served as initial destinations for the experimental group typically became more disadvantaged over time, becoming poorer and less racially integrated. Census data indicate that those areas, which averaged 51 percent minority in 1990, had become 67 percent minority by 2000, and interim survey data indicate that subsequent moves by the compliers tended to increase their racial isolation (Orr et al. 2003). In the segregated metropolitan areas of the United States, a large minority presence is powerfully associated with social and economic disadvantages for area residents (Massey and Denton 1993). Perhaps more important, even in 1990, very few of the destination areas were the type of affluent neighborhoods that have shown large effects on student achievement (Sanbonmatsu et al. 2006). Even the suburban areas to which some in the MTO experimental group successfully relocated were becoming moderately poor in the 1990s. So MTO moved families from very poor to less poor areas rather than to affluent ones, and the uneven geography of risk and opportunity (Briggs 2005; Galster and Killen 1995) was shifting as the experiment evolved and families experienced important changes in their lives.

Fourth, the point of comparison also shifted dramatically: About 70 percent of the MTO control group had also moved out of public housing four to seven years after random assignment (Orr et al. 2003). Control-group families were living in neighborhoods almost 18 percent less poor than their original ones. Revitalization programs and demolition of public housing, which received a major boost from federal policy in the 1990s (Popkin, Eiseman, and Cove 2004), were one big reason for these moves by the control group, but so was the persistent desire to exit troubled projects. As a result, many members of the MTO control group are now movers, too, not members of an in-place control group.

Despite these limitations, at the interim point that immediately preceded our fieldwork, complier families in the MTO experimental group were living in neighborhoods about half as poor, on average, as the neighborhoods where families in the control group lived. Also, these complier families had lived for a much longer time in low-poverty areas. Even allowing for the high noncompliance rate, the experimental group has therefore had, on average, an experience that sharply contrasts with the dominant pattern for low-income recipients of housing assistance across the nation. At this point, we may confidently assert that MTO is a test of at least two important things for very low income families that used to live in high-poverty public housing projects:

1. The experience and effects of *living* in lower-poverty neighborhoods over some period of time
2. The experience and effects of *relocating* (moving per se) to different types of neighborhoods, sometimes several times, while raising children, navigating costly housing markets through the voucher program, and handling other life challenges

MTO findings on educational outcomes and the role of school choice

Educational outcomes

Although the Gautreaux results appeared to offer great promise for improving educational outcomes by helping very low income black families relocate from high-poverty to low-poverty communities—and specifically to high-performing, middle-class, white suburban school districts—the research evidence thus far suggests that MTO has had a limited impact on children’s school quality, academic performance, or effort (study behaviors). Early-impact studies in Baltimore and Boston, which focused on outcomes one to three years after random assignment, indicated significant improvements in school quality at both sites (Katz, Kling, and Liebman 2003; Ladd and Ludwig 2003); Baltimore findings further indicated positive impacts on reading and mathematics scores (Ludwig, Duncan, and Ladd 2003). But survey researchers flagged constraints on housing and school choice as factors to watch as MTO evolved (Ladd and Ludwig 2003), and at the interim point, qualitative interviews at multiple sites indicated that some MTO children were not attending neighborhood schools after relocation, because of special needs, safety concerns, or concerns about grades dropping (Popkin, Harris,

and Cunningham 2001). These early studies provide limited insight, however, into how and why MTO families actually made their school choices.

At the interim mark, four to seven years after random assignment, children in the MTO experimental group were doing no better academically, across all sites, than children in the other treatment groups, at least as measured by standardized test scores (Orr et al. 2003) (table 1). This overall finding held even when subgroups of children, such as those who moved at a younger age, were analyzed. Treatment effects were observed only in Baltimore and Chicago—and only on reading scores. Moreover, experimental-group children were attending schools with only small advantages relative to controls in performance (as measured by their school’s percentile rank on state exams), poverty rate, exposure to white classmates, or exposure to students with limited English proficiency—a commonly employed set of disadvantage measures (table 1). School-level integration with white peers, like neighborhood-level integration with white neighbors, has long been used to index access to school opportunity (Clotfelter 2004), and both dimensions point to limited gains by the MTO experimental group—even by the compliers. Further analyses of these survey data indicate that the young children who showed early-impact benefits in Baltimore did not sustain those gains, that there were no measurable treatment effects on school climate or resources as reported by MTO children themselves, and that producing substantial access to high-performing schools is the major opportunity that MTO has failed to garner, let alone sustain (Sanbonmatsu et al. 2006).⁴

The failure to produce such access is due, in part, to the fact that 80 percent of the experimental group (and 70 percent of the subset that successfully moved) stayed in the same school district and, in part, to the way MTO families used the school choices they had. For the first factor, inequalities in school context are much more about between-district rather than within-district differences, and this is much more the case now than a generation ago because of the abandonment of central-city school districts by many middle- and upper-income white families (Clotfelter 2004). Some 88 percent of the children in the Gautreaux suburban sample attended schools with standardized test scores at the national average or above (Rosenbaum 1995),

⁴Sanbonmatsu et al. (2006) acknowledge that self-reports may reflect different frames of reference, for example, higher expectations on the part of young compliers who had never attended inner-city schools. Also, other mediators of educational outcomes, such as employment or parenting practices, are less amenable to relocation-only interventions, and MTO interim survey data suggested minimal impacts on those.

Table 1. MTO Interim Impacts on School Characteristics and Educational Achievement

School Characteristics	Control Mean	Experimental versus Control Impacts	
		Intent-to-Treat	Treatment-on-Treated
Free lunch (N = 3,562)			
Current school	65.7%	6.6% lower*	13% lower*
Average school	72.1%	6.7% lower*	13.3% lower*
White (N = 4,875)			
Current school	10.6%	4% higher*	8.9% higher*
Average school	8.6%	4.7% higher*	10.1% higher*
Limited English proficiency (N = 4,019)			
Current school	16.8%	2.7% lower*	5.8% lower*
Average school	18.1%	3% lower*	6.3% lower*
Magnet school (N = 3,945)			
Current school	24.9%	5.1% lower*	11.3%* lower
Average school	18.2%	3.5% lower*	7.7% lower*
Achievement outcomes			
Woodcock-Johnson broad reading score (N = 5,169)	497.31	0.92 higher	2.04 higher
Woodcock-Johnson broad mathematics score (N = 5,187)	501.23	0.22 higher	0.49 higher

Source: Orr et al. (2003).

Note: Intent-to-treat comprises compliers and noncompliers. Treatment-on-treated comprises compliers only. Control means and impact estimates are regression adjusted with robust standard errors (not shown).

* $p < 0.05$.

but less than 10 percent of the MTO experimental-group children and only 14 percent of the compliers attended schools ranked at or above the state average in mean test scores (Orr et al. 2003). Children who were living outside the original district were more likely than those who had stayed (20 percent versus 8 percent) to be in a school above that mark, and this relative locational success varied significantly across the MTO sites.⁵ But these other districts were typically in the older at-risk suburbs where poverty increased dramatically in the 1990s and where pockets of racial segregation grew as well (Orfield 2002).

⁵At the interim follow-up, experimental-group children and youth were more likely to be outside their origin district in greater Boston (32.9 percent) and Los Angeles (37.8 percent) than in Baltimore (23.6 percent), Chicago (18.3 percent), or New York (13.8 percent) (Orr et al. 2003).

There is also evidence that school and district-level changes over the course of the experiment narrowed the gaps among schools in the three treatment groups—that school contexts shifted, not just that children transferred across those contexts (Orr et al. 2003). Because of aggressive school reform in some cities and because most of the control group moved at some point, control-group children were also in schools with higher test scores and were more likely to be in magnet schools than they were at baseline.

School choice

Nationally, about three-quarters of children in public schools still attend “assigned” (neighborhood) schools (Briggs 2005), and 71 percent of MTO children did so continuously from baseline to the interim point (authors’ calculations using interim survey data). That is, school enrollment is generally determined by neighborhood or other attendance zones, making parents “nonchoosers” in the shorthand of educational research. The family’s housing and neighborhood choice is its school choice, at least in terms of public education. But the share of children attending neighborhood schools has dropped over the past decade as magnet school programs, charter schools, and school voucher initiatives expand choice across the country; also, wider choice has been the rule for years in some MTO communities, such as Boston and New York, either at the elementary or secondary level or both. Finally, a small share of MTO children had attended private school for some period of time by the interim mark. At that point, 10 percent of program children at the New York site had attended a magnet, charter, or private school chosen by the family, as had 12 percent in greater Boston and a whopping 54 percent in greater Los Angeles. Consistent with the five-site proportion of choosers, just under one-third (31 percent) of the adolescents we interviewed had attended a nonassigned school by the interim mark.⁶ The key question about school choice in MTO, then, is, How did families that had meaningful school choices make them? What were their priorities and challenges in making them, and did these choices help expose children to better schools that offered greater opportunities?

Education researchers have not addressed housing choice extensively, except to note that housing choices and prices within metropolitan housing

⁶Across all five MTO sites, experimental compliers who were attending school in the same district at baseline and the interim survey mark four to seven years later were somewhat less likely (23.7 percent versus 37 percent) to have been school choosers (authors’ calculations, using interim survey data).

markets are sensitive to school quality indicators, including major differences in average test scores across districts—a pattern driven by where middle- and upper-income households choose to live and school their children (Briggs 2005; Clotfelter 2004). This gap in research is especially glaring in the case of low-income minority families that tend to have the worst school outcomes and the poorest housing choices. Still, analyses of school choice have expanded and diversified rapidly in recent years, as school vouchers, charter schools, and other innovations grow in scale, variety, and visibility. The widely held view is that parents choose schools according to the three “P’s”: how well the school *performs*, how *pleasant* or welcoming it is, and how *proximate* or close to home it is (Bell 2005). But considering the tremendous range of priorities and approaches expressed by parents, especially across differences in social class, researchers have proposed three ways of looking at school choice: resources, cultures, and choice sets.

Resources. The resource model compares parents by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and other dimensions according to the resources they can or do bring to bear in the choice process, such as time, transportation, and information. Like an earlier generation of studies (e.g., Jencks 1970), this research emphasizes the lack of access low-income parents have to reliable information on making better school choices, from barriers to obtaining and using the information made available by institutional sources such as school staff to social networks of relatives and friends who are similarly situated and therefore ill-equipped to provide effective advice.

Cultures. A newer body of research argues that, resources aside, parents bring different decision-making cultures—repertoires of school experience and beliefs about the role of schooling in their children’s lives—to bear on choices (Bulman 2004). Even middle-class parents, for example, appear to differ widely on the degree to which the school environment should emphasize ethical values as opposed to narrower academic notions of achievement or the degree to which schools should help less academically inclined children obtain practical vocational skills versus prepare for college. A key unresolved question in this research is whether and how school choice cultures and practices shift with changes in context, such as relocation to very different neighborhoods.

Choice sets. Finally, Bell (2005) presents evidence on why differences in choice sets (“the actual markets within which parents choose”) (29) matter as much as, or more than, differences in the choice process itself. As she notes, “[T]he vast majority (up to 97 percent) of parents with children in failing schools choose to leave their children in those schools even when

it is their legal right [under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001] to do otherwise” (Bell 2005, 2). Using qualitative interviews with “choosers,” she finds that parents quickly narrow their searches to limited sets, based on nominations by trusted contacts and also “customary attendance patterns” (Bell 2005, 2) (where parents themselves or people they know were enrolled). These criteria lead to big differences in the sets of schools that parents choose to investigate and from which they ultimately select (whether average failure rate, selectivity, or other measures are used to differentiate schools in each choice set).

So parents make school choices for—and sometimes with—their children in different ways, with different resources, and, perhaps, with different cultural logic. But thus far, these choice-related perceptions and behaviors have not been studied in the context of housing mobility programs. Likewise, the growing body of research on how and why families choose the schools they do has not examined the interplay of housing and school choice in the lives of low-income families and the prospects for changing how choices are made after an exit from a poor inner-city community.

Tackling the puzzles in MTO: The Three-City Study

The Three-City Study of Moving to Opportunity was designed to examine key puzzles that emerged in previous MTO research. We conducted our study in three of the five MTO sites—Boston, Los Angeles, and New York—and focused on how and why questions. To better understand what statistical analyses of close-ended surveys have been unable to explain, we used mostly qualitative methods, which are particularly important for understanding why participants in social programs make the choices they do, as well as for understanding significant variation within treatment groups.

Our family-level data were collected in 2004 and 2005—about 6 to 10 years after families’ initial placement through the MTO program and about 2 years after interim survey data were collected. First, we randomly selected 122 families and conducted 276 semistructured, in-depth qualitative interviews with parents, adolescents, and young adults in all three treatment groups, including compliers and noncompliers in the experimental and Section 8 comparison groups. We sampled randomly from all three groups within the stratum of families that had an adolescent child in the home at the time of the interview. We oversampled families in Los Angeles because it was the site with the highest lease-up rate for MTO experimental group families and because a large number of families there were excluded from the interim

survey because they had moved after 1997. Overall, we conducted 81 interviews in Boston, 120 in Los Angeles, and 75 in New York. The combined cooperation rate for the interviews—consents as a share of eligible households contacted—was 79 percent.⁷

Next, we launched family-focused ethnographic fieldwork (Burton 1997; Weisner 1996), visiting a subset of 39 interviewed families repeatedly over a period of six to eight months. In recruiting this subset, which included only control-group and experimental-group complier families, we oversampled families that were still living in suburban school districts—considering these to be locationally successful, at least in relative terms.⁸ The cooperation rate for the ethnographic subsample was 70 percent.

Statistical tests confirm that both samples are quite representative of the much larger population of MTO families surveyed at the interim mark, both in terms of background traits and employment status—although we modestly undersampled Hispanics and oversampled families on welfare (it may be that they were more available for ethnographic visiting)—and a range of other social outcomes (table 2).

The qualitative interviews, which were conducted in English, Spanish, and Cambodian, let us explore a variety of issues, including neighborhood environment, housing, health, education, and employment. The sample covers the full range of outcomes (from very successful to highly distressed) for all three MTO treatment groups and both complier statuses, a key to generating representative results. Interviews with parents averaged one to two hours; interviews with adolescents and young adults averaged 45 minutes to an hour. This article mines the parent and adolescent interviews primarily, although for selected cases, we draw on interviews and participant observation of young adults—the first cohort of MTO’s next generation to age into adulthood—as well.

⁷We made multiple attempts to locate all eligible respondents, including calling (when valid phone numbers were available), sending mailings, and using the team’s ethnographers to knock on respondents’ doors. Abt Associates, Inc., which maintains the tracking database, requested updated information from its tracking service and searched the National Change of Address database. In addition, we sent some addresses to the National Opinion Research Center’s tracking service. Finally, where possible, ethnographers went to the last known address and attempted to obtain a new address and/or telephone information for the respondent. The final cooperation rate was computed excluding those we were unable to contact because of death or an invalid address.

⁸Because of the large number of refugee families receiving housing assistance in Los Angeles and other gateway cities and the very limited research base on their special needs, we also drew a special sample of Southeast Asian refugee families at the Los Angeles site.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics: Three-City Interview and Ethnographic Samples Compared with Interim Impacts Evaluation Sample

	Interim Impacts Evaluation Sample (N = 2,720 households)	Qualitative Interview Sample (N = 122 households)	Ethnographic Sample (N = 39 households)
Demographic traits			
Adult female	98%	98%	95%
Children female	53%	53%	49%
Head of household is non-Hispanic black	43%	54%	46%
Head of household is Hispanic	46%	35%	39%
Family size: two to four children under 18	64%	68%	62%
Locational and social outcomes			
2000 neighborhood poverty rate (2002 locations)			
Less than 10 percent poor	8%	10%	14%
More than 30 percent poor	58%	50%	35%
Residential mobility: Moved one to three times	58%	61%	69%
Adult completed high school	37%	41%	36%
Adult employed	52%	55%	44%
Total household income (mean)	\$16,703	\$18,514	\$16,278
Respondent or child receiving TANF	31%	40%	53%
Adult BMI (mean)	30	30	30
Adult psychological distress index (mean)	0.33	0.32	0.35
Child psychological distress index (mean)	0.27	0.21	0.22
Child ever arrested	12%	16%	28%
Youth risky behavior index (mean)	0.40	0.36	0.38

Notes: The first column comprises three of the five MTO sites: Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. This column presents our calculations based on a restricted-use version of the MTO Interim Impacts Evaluation Survey obtained from Abt Associates, Inc., and HUD. Column headers indicate total sizes for each sample; cell sizes vary minimally because of missing data. Locations are as of the 2002 Interim Impacts Survey (Orr et al. 2003). BMI = body mass index (30 or higher indicates obesity); TANF = Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.

To enhance validity and extend our data on priority themes, the ethnographic fieldwork added direct observation to what participants reported about their attitudes, choices, and outcomes. The fieldwork focused on the core constructs of families' lives, such as daily routines to "get life accomplished" (Burton 1997, 208), important social relations, and the details of engagement (or lack of same) in their neighborhood of residence and other neighborhoods, such as those where relatives or close friends lived. The fieldwork was a blend of "naturalistic" or unstructured interviewing, semistructured interviewing, and direct observation of family life inside and outside the home. This core-constructs approach, combining informal interviewing and participant observation, provides a robust source of inferences about social processes and other causal mechanisms to complement formal interviews focused heavily on outcomes. Unlike more established traditions in ethnog-

raphy, such as community, in-school, and peer-group studies, family-focused ethnography centers on developing rich, valid accounts of family-level decisions and outcomes, including efforts to support or advance children, elders, or other family members.

We analyzed both the interview and the fieldnote data using MTO's treatment-group structure and also analyzed the fieldnotes (beyond that structure) on the basis of exposure (years in low-poverty environments or suburban school districts or both), patterned social relations, and other dimensions. The latter centered on within-treatment-group variation. A team of trained staff coded the approximately 300 hours of interview transcripts for key themes and issues; the coding included checks for interrater reliability. The coded transcripts were loaded into QSR6 qualitative database software, which allows for cross-cutting analysis by codes and respondent characteristics (e.g., sorting by adolescent girls talking about safety and school). The ethnographic fieldnotes for a total of 430 visits were linked to the interview transcripts and selected interim evaluation data, coded by fieldworkers (with reliability checks), and then analyzed using EthnoNotes, which facilitates multisite team ethnography (Lieber, Weisner, and Presley 2003). This included both family and group analyses in the form of memoing (Miles and Huberman 1994).

The third element of the study, which we term “scans,” focuses on the changing contexts in which MTO families are leading their lives, for example, the economic and social changes at the neighborhood, city, and metropolitan levels that are reshaping the geography of risks and resources over time. The scans analyze census and administrative data at the neighborhood, city, metropolitan region, and other levels, including data from the National Center for Education Statistics (1998–2006), HUD, and the National Neighborhood Crime Study. The integration of distinct types of data is crucial for generating richer, more valid results and actionable specifics to guide decision makers—Geertz's “thick description” (1973, 5) but with “policy sense” (Briggs 1997, 226). Mixed-method approaches are also crucial for building better theory, over time, from a base of complex and mixed results. But we caution readers about the need to interpret the different types of data appropriately. For example, the ethnographic field data, while drawn from a random sample that generated a wide range in the phenomena under study, follows a case study rather than a sampling logic. The case-study approach allows us to understand family circumstances as integrated constructs—families as cases that are revealing for the conditions that covary within them—without indicating how common those constructs are across the program population as a whole (Ragin 2000; Small 2005).

Put differently, if we trust the measures that were employed as valid and also important, survey results often tell us what we can reliably conclude about a large population but with little insight into the underlying social processes of interest. However, ethnographic and other qualitative methods provide the depth and texture that illuminate such processes—school choices as the subjects themselves perceive and make them, for example—but typically without precise population inferences. The results are not less true simply because we cannot indicate with precision what share of the larger population the cases represent. Small-number results are often big in importance, but this does not settle the issue of how prevalent they are. We use the interview data (from the larger and more representative sample) to indicate prevalence and explore broad patterns, referencing the full interim survey results where appropriate. In the next section, we outline the basis for selecting particular, revelatory cases for greater depth.

Findings: School choice in context

Our data point to two major reasons why an MTO-assisted relocation did not necessarily translate into significant and sustained improvements in school quality for many families in the experimental group.

First, our in-depth conversations with parents as well as children corroborate the hypothesis that subsequent moves to poorer neighborhoods eroded gains in school quality for at least some MTO children. The assessed differences between current and former schools are much more specific and dramatic than recollection biases—such as romanticizing schools left behind in low-poverty areas—could explain. We cannot know exactly how important these differences are for achievement, but the children experienced the differences and the losses as very real—in the form of classrooms that were less safe and more disorderly.

Second, and compounding the first factor, assessment of schools, resources for choice, and priorities also contributed to keeping the children of experimental-group families in low-performing schools even when more academically promising choices appear to have been available. We observed no treatment-group differences in these choice factors, although there was some variation within groups based on the parent's educational background or the (rare) presence of an extraordinary social contact who acted as a vital information resource. Since MTO impact analyses largely point to noneffects on educational attainment, our illustrations focus on the program movers, that is, the group for whom expectations were highest.

The first factor reminds us that housing and neighborhood choices really are school choices for many families, but the second—on which we focus—underlines the fact that the decisions parents make when they have wider school choices matter. Most MTO parents were poorly informed about what their choices included and emphasized safety and order—first and last—as indicators of a good school. Relocation had little impact on these factors—either information poverty or a safety-first-and-last cultural logic—in part because few MTO families appear to have converted new locations into new social resources in the form of advantaged social networks. Instead, their networks remained insular, centered most often on disadvantaged kin and a few close friends. In addition, parents struggled to balance a desire for better schools with caregiving, work, and the desire to make familiar settings a source of emotional and social stability for their children amid the disruptions associated with moving to very different neighborhoods.

Information poverty: How to determine good schools

Most MTO parents were relatively “information poor” about school choice. Only one in six of the parents who made school choices cited formal sources of information, such as teachers or school staff, about school offerings. Just under half reported specific steps they took to find out which schools were academically promising—even if the choice set was limited in quality. Information poverty did not vary across treatment groups, suggesting that relocation itself did little to change access to information. In this respect, our findings echo a growing research literature, which indicates that most parents, and notably low-income and minority parents, do not have any formal assistance or counseling when they choose schools for their children (Bulman 2004).

Indeed, when they had school choices to make (and sometimes even when they officially did not), parents relied heavily on the referrals provided by their networks of relatives and friends. For the most part, these contacts were also low-income people with limited education and knowledge of school options. Neighbors in new, less poor locations were cordial strangers or casual acquaintances at best, not sources of information or other aid. Regardless of background or specific behavior patterns, movers rarely converted new locations into significant new social resources. Not only did MTO parents not receive formal counseling, then, but as other studies have shown, their social contacts were probably less productive, in terms of information quality and referral, than the contacts of higher-income parents tend to be (Bell 2005). Some word-of-mouth advice was valuable, however, as we show later.

Relatives were an especially important word-of-mouth resource. For example, Kia is a black preadolescent (age 11) in the experimental group. (All of the names we use are pseudonyms.) Her family moved to an inner suburb of Boston, on to another suburb, and then back to the inner city. She explained how her mother, Danielle, relied on her cousin's assessment to make the latest school choice:

Q: How did you decide which school to go to?

A: I didn't decide. It was my cousin Allana, and my mom just said, "She'll see if that school is good. If it's not good, she'll look into a different school." (Interview)

Danielle's decision to find a bigger apartment when her third child was born and the family's relocation to the inner city where they could find such an apartment led to a clear decline in the quality of the school environment for her other two daughters (see the sidebar). The only advantage that Allana provided to Danielle was that she had slightly older children who had attended Boston schools. Yet Allana, a resident of the housing projects where the family once lived, could not provide them with genuinely useful information. Toward the end of our ethnographic fieldwork, Danielle had shifted her outlook on the new school from "wait and see" to real alarm. In the sidebar, we examine her case in depth, emphasizing the trajectory of the family's housing and school choices in light of her priorities, her information and other resources, and housing market and other constraints. While we cannot know precisely what share of all MTO families these patterns represent, the main features of the case—the moving into poorer areas over time, the focus on basic safety concerns rather than broader academic opportunity, the information poverty of insular networks, and the parent's limited education (as a resource for assessing and interacting with schools)—clearly apply to significant numbers of complier families according to the interim survey (Orr et al. 2003) as well as our interview sample.

**"My girls are not used to this": Danielle's family
(MTO, Boston experimental mover)**

Danielle, a black single mother of two, was 33 when we met her in 2004. She had used her housing voucher and the MTO relocation assistance to leave the public housing development in inner-city Boston where she grew up and where a number of her closest relatives still lived. She moved with her two young daughters, Shauna (now 12) and Kia (11), to Danvers, a moderate-income, predominantly white suburb north of Boston.

This first community was not comfortable for the family. Danielle remembers the neighbors in her apartment complex as unfriendly (“They would never say ‘hi’ to me”) and thought them racially prejudiced as well: “They was scared of me.... When I would take out my girls to play, they would take their kids inside. How am I going to be hurting them with my two kids?” Before long, Danielle and her daughters were evicted from this first apartment because of a fight between her current boyfriend and her ex-boyfriend. Given what she perceived to be an unwelcoming climate there, however, Danielle told us she “wasn’t about to stay there” anyway.

Next, the family moved to the southern suburb of Brockton, which is 22 percent black. Danielle and her daughters liked Brockton and lived there for five years. By the time we began to visit them, they had just made another rushed move. Danielle had given birth to her third child and wanted an additional bedroom; she made it clear, throughout our months of visiting, that providing materially for her girls, beyond the basics, was very important to her. But the first three-bedroom apartment she found was above a detoxification center. Her landlord neglected the place, which was decrepit and overrun with rats. Only after threatening to call the local media was Danielle able to break her contract and get out, but the abrupt move meant that she had to take whatever three-bedroom apartment she could find quickly. This last move landed the family back in inner-city Boston and its schools, in a neighborhood close to Danielle’s relatives in public housing. She thought at first that this was a big plus, but she soon described it as “the worst neighborhood” she had ever lived in.

Shauna and Kia missed the Brockton schools immediately. Shauna told us that the teachers there cared more and taught better. Her new peers were different, too. Shauna’s early impression of her new school was that the students were “meaner” and that “they mess with people.” She explained the disorder: “Like if a kid be hitting you or messing with you, the teacher just tells you to sit back down on your desk.” Our ethnographer asked, “What would they do in the [Brockton] school?” Shauna answered emphatically, “They would go to the principal’s office.” She then described “teachers who don’t teach” and classes where “I sit there and do nothing.”

Danielle’s early assessment was that the new school was “all right,” although she had not visited it three months after her children enrolled and later even acknowledged that she had little interaction with the teachers and staff. Months into our fieldwork, her view had soured. The girls in Shauna and Kia’s new schools were “fast” (acting out in ways not appropriate for their age) and fighting constantly, not like in Brockton. Danielle said, “You see, my girls didn’t grow up

in these kinds of neighborhoods. They're not used to this. They bully Shauna sometimes....Kia's gotten beat up."

While much commentary on the inner city focuses on the violence and disorder in neighborhoods, Danielle kept her children off the streets. But she could not isolate them from the trouble at school—and the family's repeated moves exacerbated the problem. As we left the field and as her girls got into more and more fights at school and felt unsafe there, Danielle was fed up. She wanted to move again.

There were exceptions to the dominant patterns. The very small number of parents in the experimental group who moved successfully *and* were able to find out about higher-performing schools also typically learned about these schools through word of mouth—but not from neighbors. Michelle, one such parent in the Boston experimental group, explained the choice to send her daughter to a stronger school outside of Boston, one with enrollment by examination:

Q: How did she end up going there?

A: My girlfriend is a schoolteacher, and her daughter was up at the high school....She told me the schools that she had applied to and she did plenty of research on the schools. So I didn't have to do much research because she already did it all for me.

Q: Could she just sign up for the school, or was there any kind of lottery system for which children got to go there?

A: Yeah, there are. There's a couple of categories. One, you have to be in Boston public school. And they go by your records, your grade records.

Q: Oh, you have to do well in school to get in?

A: Yes, she's an honor roll student. (Interview)

While the data are not available, it is likely that most MTO parents, including many who were in the experimental group and relocated successfully, had themselves attended predominantly minority, poor, and underperforming schools. Almost two-thirds had not completed high school, making it hard for them to determine an academically promising school for their children. In Boston and New York, where students are often given the option of selecting a theme high school, a few MTO parents were attracted by the name or theme of a school and used it as a basis for determining whether the school was good or appropriate for their children.

Two cases in point are Jada from New York and Bianca from Boston. Both had successfully relocated to a low-poverty neighborhood with their families and had managed to remain there for years.

Knowing that Jada wanted to be a pediatrician, her father supported her choice of the Academy of Health Careers high school. Our ethnographer observed as father and daughter went through a long list of schools provided by the New York City school district and selected that school based on the name indicating its focus, unaware—until our fieldworker pointed it out—that the school’s graduation rate was just 40 percent. Jada’s family had left the inner city for a safe, low-poverty neighborhood on Staten Island, where she attended an assigned neighborhood school. Jada was active at school, and her parents were obviously pleased at the education she was receiving. But now, faced for the first time with a school choice not dictated by their housing location, her parents were struggling with limited information on how to choose well.

In Boston, Shenice supported her daughter Bianca’s choice of Boston Tech Academy specifically because it guaranteed students the use of a laptop computer and the chance to keep it, for a dollar, upon graduation. Shenice had applied to the METCO (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity) program, a voluntary desegregation program that buses academically promising children from inner-city communities to some of the highest-performing school districts in suburban Boston. But when her daughter was not admitted, Shenice did not push Bianca to apply to a selective (examination) school in the city, saying that the prospect intimidated her daughter. Shenice liked Boston Tech’s focus on computers and considered it the sign of a good school. However, like Jada’s father, Shenice did not know that this school was one of Boston’s underperforming, predominantly minority schools. Mother and daughter, who associated racial diversity and technology with school opportunity, were baffled when the school year began and they noticed that few white students attended Boston Tech.

Underscoring how significant such information poverty is, some parents who obtained additional information about schools were confused and did not understand what to do with the information they got. For example, Danielle, whose school and housing choices we profiled earlier, had also heard about METCO and considered placing her daughter Kia in the program. Yet, in a conversation about schools, Danielle clearly indicated to our ethnographer that she did not understand how this special program worked and thought METCO was a particular school:

“I wanted to sign them up for the METCO school,” said Danielle. I asked her where she heard about METCO, and she said that she “just heard it was a good school.”...Danielle explained, somewhat confused, “But I have to wait because Kia has to take a test or something, and they give that test only some time, some grade.” (Fieldnote)

On another visit, Danielle’s older daughter Shauna said to our ethnographer, “I want to go [Boston] Latin Academy,” a high-performing and selective examination school within the district. When we probed, Shauna added that she knew Boston Latin to be “a really good school” (Fieldnote). Her mother, who was listening, had not heard of the school, nor did she question Shauna about it. On another visit, we learned that Danielle did not even know that her daughter’s school had after-school programs—until Shauna mentioned it to our ethnographer in her mother’s presence.

Finally, information poverty is also shaping the higher education choices of MTO children. We observed, and parental interviews confirmed, confusion about requirements, financial aid, course options, and more. It is not clear whether MTO children attending high school in lower-poverty areas, or outside of central-city districts, are getting more or better college counseling than their counterparts enrolled in more disadvantaged areas.

Safety first—and last?

In the interim survey, most parents in all three MTO treatment groups across the five MTO sites, and 55 percent in the case of the experimental group, cited safety concerns in the old neighborhood (“getting away from drugs, gangs”) as their most important reason for wanting to move, while 16 percent cited “better schools for my children” as the top reason (Orr et al. 2003, C3). Our analysis of spatial patterns in crime indicates that compliers in the experimental group saw a 72 percent improvement in the violent crime rate in their pre- and postmove neighborhoods at the point of initial relocation, from 39.8 to 11.2 violent crimes per 1,000 population (the average for the 1999–2001 period). By the interim mark, members of the experimental group who had moved again were residing in areas with a substantially higher rate of 22.2 violent crimes. This was comparable to what members of the Section 8 comparison group and all voucher holders in these metropolitan areas experienced for that period and higher than the average central-city rate of 12.9—but still 44 percent lower than the rate in the extremely poor baseline locations in public housing.

Consistent with the desire to live in much safer neighborhoods, about one-quarter of the MTO parents we interviewed, including about one in seven choosers, emphasized safety and order as the key indicators of a good school. Parents consistently emphasized that safety and discipline—and the absence of violence or gang activity in particular—made a school good or bad. Safety and order—especially low levels of classroom disruption—are, we should note, important indicators of school quality that directly affect learning. But among the choosers, one in seven appeared to make these the overwhelming priorities when assessing school quality, to the exclusion of indicators of academic opportunity. Although the cell sizes are admittedly small, we did not observe a treatment effect for this cultural logic—even, for example, when families moved from low-poverty areas back to the inner city—and, we must note, it is a well-founded logic for parents whose choices have historically been defined by a lack of choice and by dramatic inequalities. But the logic of avoiding school risks does not ensure that parents will make the most of school choices to garner academic opportunities.

School safety concerns appeared somewhat more common for respondents from Los Angeles, which was experiencing a surge of gang-related problems when we conducted our interviews in 2004. Denise, a mother in the Los Angeles experimental group, talked about the differences between the “ghetto” school in her old neighborhood and the school her children now attend:

Q: But you said part of the reason you moved was to get into better schools....How do you think it compares to the other schools...like in [the neighborhood where you used to live in public housing before MTO]?

A: Oh, you can forget about in [the old neighborhood]. Those schools were, I don't know, just living in the ghetto basically....

Q: So tell me about his current school.

A: It's a great school....They don't play around with anything. They have a lot of rules and stuff and that's what I like about it....They keep an eye on them. Really, they don't play. There's school security....They just don't tolerate a lot of things. So that is what I like about it. (Interview)

Kimberlyn, also a parent in the Los Angeles experimental group, lamented having to move her adolescent son Damian from a better high school in the San Fernando Valley (where MTO placed the family in a low-poverty neighborhood) back to an inner-city school. She complained of some racial

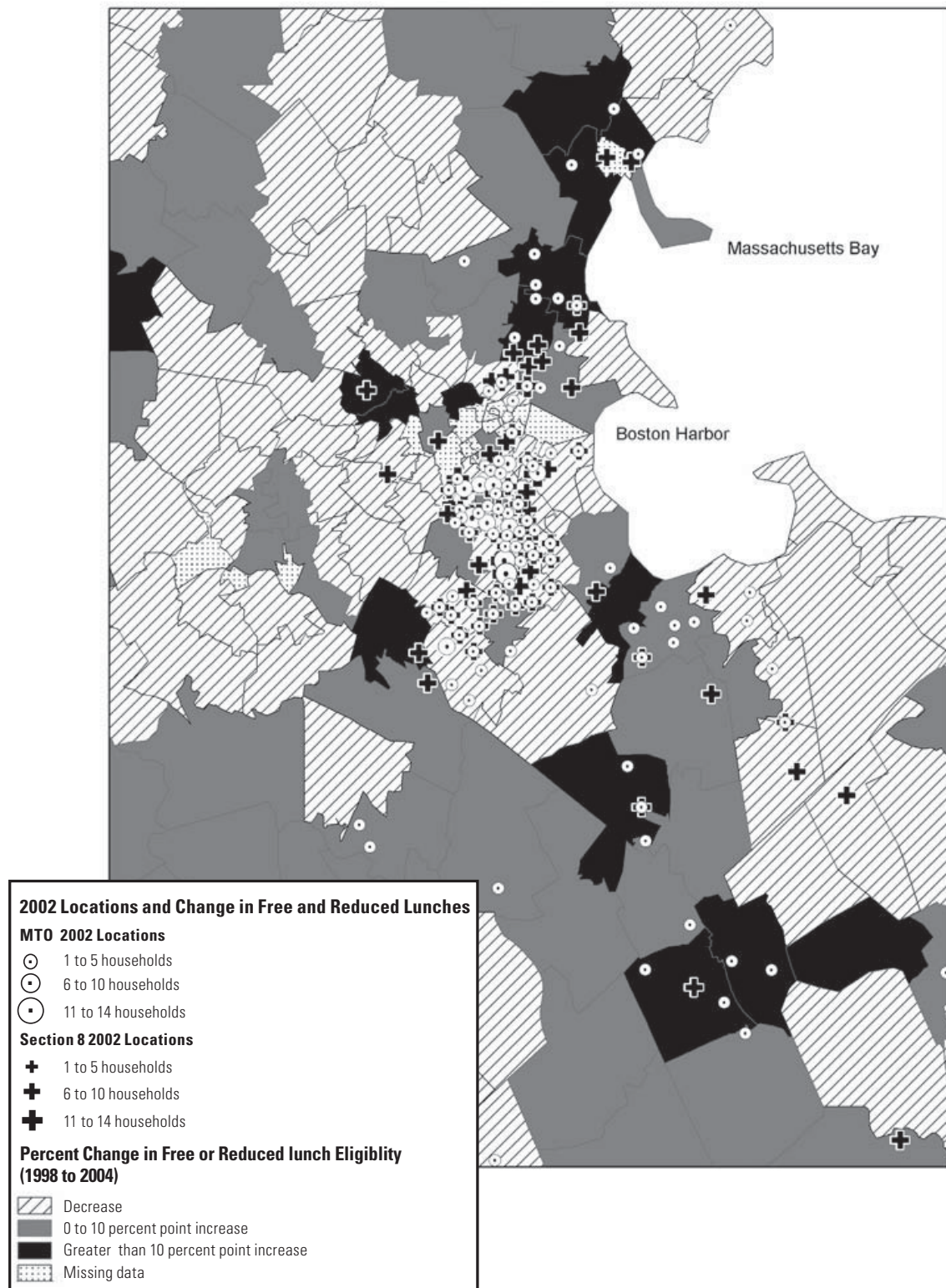
harassment in her apartment complex in the Valley, but eventually, she told us, she decided to move back to an inner-city neighborhood in the southern part of Los Angeles to be closer to family and friends and what she perceived to be better access to institutional resources such as job training. The best she felt she could do for Damian was to move him from the assigned inner-city high school to another, modestly safer one. She accomplished this by giving the school district the address of one of her friends. Kimberlyn concluded, “Gangs is everywhere.” While we visited the family, Damian was at risk of not graduating and was, said Kimberlyn, “not taking school seriously and getting an attitude” (Fieldnote).

While safety concerns were much more common among the families that continued to live in or moved back to poorer, central-city neighborhoods, these concerns also shaped the school choices of some MTO families living in the inner suburbs, where poverty and distress increased dramatically in the 1990s. Figure 1 illustrates the change for the Boston metropolitan area, where experimental-group compliers in 2002 were more likely than members of the Section 8 comparison group to be residing in ZIP codes where rates for free and reduced-price lunches increased markedly between 1998 and 2004, notably in the inner suburbs north and south of the central city.

When asked how she had chosen the middle school for her children, April, an experimental-group mother living in a Boston suburb, explained, “My kids told me” (Fieldnote). Yet her children, Georgiana and Tevin, disagreed about which school to attend. Tevin wanted to be with friends at the closest neighborhood school, while Georgiana wanted to attend a school slightly farther away because it had more honors classes and better teachers and was “less ghetto.” When asked whether she knew anything about either school, April replied, “Not really.” In the end, she settled the dispute with a safety-first emphasis. Georgiana explained, “My mom said, ‘No! Nobody is going to Holmes [Tevin’s choice] because there are too many gangs and too many fights’” (Fieldnote).

Some MTO parents felt that they had to choose between the lesser of two evils. For example, Robin, a black mother in the Los Angeles experimental group, moved first to an eastern suburb and then later to another nearby suburb. After the second move, she opted not to move her daughter Terri out of the local high school despite the fact that Terri had been “jumped” (assaulted) by girls there and was seen “ditching school” (being truant). Among other factors, Terri was struggling to fit in at a school with mostly white and Mexican students, yet her mother saw a stark contrast with inner-city schools. Robin explained,

Figure 1. MTO Residential Locations in the Context of Changing School Composition: Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Receipt in Metropolitan Boston Schools (by ZIP Code), 1998 to 2004



Source: National Center for Education Statistics (1998–2006); geocoded MTO Interim Impacts Evaluation Survey data obtained from Abt Associates, Inc., and HUD.

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

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

In other cases, the priority placed on safety helps explain why a small number of experimental-group parents who stayed in the same school district also kept their children in the same schools after the family moved—schools serving high-poverty neighborhoods anchored by public housing projects. In these instances, both parents and children noted that even if the schools in their old neighborhood were dangerous, their risks were well understood and therefore less threatening. For example, parents pointed to their hard-won knowledge about gang colors and which groups of children caused trouble. Moving their children to a new school could mean moving them into new gang territory where the colors were less well understood and problems were less able to be avoided. Some youth were also hesitant to move from schools they knew were unsafe because they had a network of friends they could rely on to defend them (“watch their backs”) or because they had established understandings with “troublemakers” who would, in turn, offer needed protection. Adam, a teen in the Section 8 comparison group in Los Angeles, left a new school to return to his old neighborhood school. “I want to be somewhere where I am more comfortable,” he told us. “You know, I really don't know nobody [at the other school]; all those other gangsters over there don't know me” (Fieldnote).

Counterexamples: Seeking out academically promising schools

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

For example, Pamela, a 74-year-old mother in the New York control group, successfully enrolled her adopted children Tricia and Eamon in a college preparatory school in the Bronx, where they live. The children participate in after-school programs and special classes. Although the children are only in the sixth grade, Pamela is already encouraging them to think about which colleges to attend. Eamon has even flown to Boston to visit Harvard and MIT, and Tricia, at the time our fieldwork ended, was set to visit colleges in California. Pamela obtained a computer for the children to use for schoolwork, and she visits their school to check on their progress.

Jessica, a mother in the New York experimental group, moved back to an inner-city neighborhood with her son James. Jessica, a teacher's aide with a college degree, carefully researched her son's school choices. She constantly monitors his homework and academic progress; she also keeps track of enrichment opportunities in and around their neighborhood. Jessica is significantly better educated than most MTO parents; living in public housing when MTO was launched reflects a particularly income-poor period in her life as a single mother, not chronic and extreme disadvantage.

But a handful of other, less well educated MTO parents also took extra steps to find the right learning opportunities for their children. Monica, a mother in the Los Angeles experimental group, enrolled her two sons in a Catholic school in their old neighborhood, a relatively poor enclave of Hispanic immigrants. Monica works at the school and knows it to be disciplined and safe. The school is operated by the church the family attends, and the school-church community is a major focus of their family life. Likewise, Laura and her children, who are in the New York control group, are actively involved in the charter school they attend in the inner city. Laura is a high school dropout and became a mother as a young teen. Her children participate in after-school programs at their charter school, and two of Laura's older

sons work at the school. During our fieldwork, one was pursuing his general equivalency diploma because it was a requirement for employment. A few parents took extreme measures to find enriching schools far beyond their neighborhoods. For example, one mother in Los Angeles used her employer's address instead of her own to get her children into the schools in an affluent community, a two-hour bus ride from home.

Finally, some schools, though chosen for safety reasons, turned out to be academically enriching. As we noted earlier, Robin's daughter Terri adapted successfully to her high school in an eastern suburb of Los Angeles, though she was in the minority as a black student there and got "jumped" early on. Along with extracurricular involvement, a part-time job, and stronger grades, Terri has developed what experts describe as essential to the learning process: productive relationships with her teachers. As she told us, "You could put me in a class right now, and I could be the only black student. With that teacher, I wouldn't care, 'cuz I know that teacher, and I know so much about that teacher, and I feel comfortable with that teacher teaching me" (Fieldnote).

More resourceful choices by some MTO experimental compliers reflected either a more educated parent—with both the cultural logic of enrichment and superior information on schools supporting the selection process—or the rare presence of a social contact, such as the schoolteacher friend cited earlier, who provided extraordinary information. These valuable contacts were not neighbors, however, and in general, those who relocated to low-poverty areas did not gather significant new information resources or other aid from neighbors.

Other concerns that limited enrollment in better schools

MTO parents, like parents everywhere, generally favored schools that were near home or otherwise conveniently located. In previous studies, low-income parents are especially likely to report convenient location as a priority, especially if they do not own cars or have access to good public transportation.⁹ Laura in New York also explained that she liked having her children in a nearby school because she could get to them quickly if "anything were to happen." A few emphasized the risk of lost academic credit, access to social supports, or the importance of making school and school-based friendships a source of stability for children amid the disruption of moving.

⁹For example, in the carefully evaluated Alum Rock school voucher demonstration, 70 percent of low-income parents cited location as the primary reason for choosing their children's schools (Maddaus 1990).

A few parents had arrangements with relatives or friends who lived in the former neighborhood to pick up their children or watch them after school. Dana, a mother in the Los Angeles experimental group, detailed her decision to have her children sleep at a relative's home in the old neighborhood to accommodate her work schedule:

A: She left elementary and she graduated fifth grade from over in [the public housing development], because I was still working, so that was my only child care. And Grandmamma, she would send them to school, [then] I brought them home.

Q: But so she went up through fifth grade at the same school over by [the development]? And even when you had moved out to [your new neighborhood]?

A: I kept her there [in the old neighborhood] because, by me driving the school bus, I would have to be at work at 4:30 in the morning.... And it was kind of hard for me to get them up and drive. So what I'd do is, I'd leave them there [at the grandmother's] during the week, and then on the weekends I'd bring them home. (Interview)

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

Discussion

MTO produced limited improvements in school context, certainly much more limited than those produced by the Gautreaux housing desegregation program that inspired the MTO experiment. Previous research underscores how important initial MTO housing choices—and the fact that Gautreaux families were placed in particular units—were as part of that sharp contrast. Going beyond the residential outcomes that shape access to particular schools and school districts, this article has focused on the thinking of MTO

families when they had school choices to make (among charters, magnets, or other nonassigned schools). Our work strongly corroborates earlier findings on how low-income parents choose schools and why they choose the schools they do, while examining the special context of assisted housing relocation and the question of whether the logic of choice shifts when poor, inner-city families move to less poor areas. Sadly, we find that it may not—at least for many families—if they are served by a relocation-only strategy.

Moving back to poorer neighborhoods

Many families in the MTO experimental group—typically citing rising rents and utility costs or problems with the housing unit or landlord—moved back to poorer neighborhoods with weaker schools. The instability and scarcity of quality, affordable housing and especially affordable rental housing for low-income minority families has not thus far received attention in the evolving literature on school choice, even though, again, housing choices define school choices for most families at all income levels. Our ongoing work focuses on this mechanism at the heart of MTO’s hoped-for versus realized effects, since so much of the literature on neighborhood effects centers on conditions sufficient for producing those effects—such as better peer influences or institutional resources—without confirming the most basic necessary condition: being able to live in a given type of neighborhood long enough for it to matter.

Information poverty—a weak context for school choice

Wider options do not mean much if people cannot exercise them effectively. Most MTO parents, like many low-income families across the nation, drew on very limited information resources, such as word-of-mouth referrals from ill-informed relatives or friends—or even their children. Across all treatment groups, parents generally lacked the information to determine which schools were of genuinely high academic quality. The families lacked institutional guidance, better-placed contacts, or other supports. Also, movers in the experimental group were not able to convert less poor locations into significant new social resources. That is, their social networks remained insular and functionally limited, focused on relatives or small circles of close friends. The information poverty of most MTO parents is the most striking and consistent pattern across sites and types of families, regardless of differences in specific school priorities or housing choices over time.

The logic of school choice

Many MTO families, like other less educated and low-income parents, made choices that belie expert views about how parents should choose schools and, more to the point, about what parents should value most. More than a quarter of the MTO movers we interviewed emphasized safety and order as the key indicators of a good school, and this was true of a subgroup (one in seven) of the choosers as well. Their choices centered on avoiding ghetto-type risks rather than on accessing broader academic opportunity.

MTO families came from some of the most dangerous public housing communities in the nation, and most said they volunteered for the program to get away from drugs and gangs. Following that logic, it is perhaps not surprising that some parents asked little more of the schools than that they be safer and more orderly. At the extremes, a small number of parents even chose not to transfer their children to new schools after a residential move because they knew the danger zones in the old schools and because children had friends to watch their backs or security-enhancing arrangements with troublemakers. These priorities, and the cultural logic that underlies them, did not vary across treatment groups; moving to less poor areas did not lead MTO parents to acculturate to a different logic. Like the information poverty pattern, this cultural logic is explained, at least in part, by the structural factor of insular networks: Broader networks are sources of different forms of logic on which to base choice, not just different facts. But few MTO mover families show signs of having built those broader networks. Workplaces, training programs, and other institutions, not neighborhoods of residence, appear to be the source of more diverse ties (few as they were) in the lives of these very disadvantaged families.

Convenience, familiarity, and stability

The need to juggle caregiving, work, and other demands encouraged some parents to enroll their children in the schools that were closest to home or most conveniently located to their sources of social support. The desire to protect children's existing friendships as a source of emotional stability amid the disruptions of moving and growing up poor was a factor as well.

Policy and research recommendations

Targeting place: Expand the definition of “opportunity neighborhoods”

An obvious lesson of MTO thus far is that defining opportunity neighborhoods as census tracts that had less than 10 percent poverty in 1990 was

not enough to get families into communities with much higher performing schools. As the MTO interim impacts evaluation report documented (Orr et al. 2003) and as our research underscores, experimental group families generally ended up in less poor neighborhoods in the same, troubled urban school districts. Others moved to inner suburbs with growing poverty and social distress. If we want to use housing assistance to significantly expand opportunity, we should directly target communities with high-performing schools, not rely on the poverty rate, let alone a point-in-time rate, as a proxy measure. Since high-performing school districts or school communities are often primarily white, this targeting strategy means confronting exclusion and discrimination in the siting of affordable housing and the placement of families that use rental housing vouchers or other assistance.

Stability and exposure: Help families stay in, not just get to, better neighborhoods

The basic conditions for academic success not only include safety, order, quality instruction, student and parental effort, and meaningful academic supports, but stability as well: that is, being part of a school community long enough to understand choices, form productive relationships with teachers and staff and other students, and adapt to a new environment. The repeated moving reported by many members of the MTO experimental group (who received special counseling and search assistance only for their first move) and the Section 8 comparison group (those who moved in the framework of the standard voucher program, but were unassisted from the start) directly undermined these processes. Most of the moves we learned about or observed directly reflect what the U.S. Bureau of the Census terms *involuntary* mobility, triggered by unaffordable housing costs, life shocks, and other challenges (Fischer 2002). Further, moving back to poor areas soon after exiting them is a particularly serious problem for black renters: Blacks and whites exit poor areas with roughly equal odds, but blacks fall back into such areas, typically within a few years, much more often than whites do (Briggs and Keys 2008; Quillian 2003).

These were not direct factors in MTO's school achievement outcomes, of course, but they helped limit, in a powerful way, the school choices available to MTO families. Policies to expand the supply of rental housing that is affordable and remains affordable for low- and moderate-income families are crucial if assisted housing mobility programs are to succeed in improving the life chances for poor families. This issue is especially critical in high-cost or tight housing markets such as greater Boston, Los Angeles, and New

York—and most of all in high-performing school districts that have historically excluded housing affordable to low- and moderate-income families. Flexibility in rent ceilings and housing voucher payment standards can help too. And when families must relocate, counseling beyond the first move has shown promise as a tool for encouraging better locational outcomes over the long run (Briggs and Turner 2006).

Program content: Inform and expand school choices directly

Housing vouchers and mobility counseling could be directly tied to school choice programs that include institutional supports for less informed, and typically more constrained, parents. Social policy programs may never be perfectly integrated or seamlessly managed to focus on particular clients. But basic supports could address the serious information poverty of families on housing assistance, encouraging parents to consider a wider choice set and a full range of indicators of schools' academic potential for their children. We do not mean that counselors should “sell” particular schools to families. But a case management approach to pre- and postmove counseling could ensure that families that participate in housing mobility programs understand the school options for their children and ensure that after moving, the families meet school staff who can help. Local institutions can also help compensate for the insular and mostly ill-informed referral networks of relatives and friends that low-income minority parents appear to rely on to make big choices. An innovative, emerging effort toward responsible relocation, triggered by major planned redevelopment in East Baltimore, shows real promise for mobilizing such institutional supports. It is encouraging that according to our informal discussions with the implementers involved, the East Baltimore effort is learning directly from MTO's limitations.

Improved counseling: Address families' concerns about safety, social supports, the disruptions of moving, and tough trade-offs

It is important for policy makers and program staff to understand the competing concerns for safety, academic and social disruption, convenience, and child care arrangements that low-income families typically consider when making school choices. Here again, well-designed and well-managed counseling can address the complexity of these choices and the trade-offs families make. Since some of them involve physical access, transportation solutions—such as car vouchers tied to housing vouchers—could also strengthen housing and school opportunity for some low-income families.

Research priorities

We plan to examine a number of issues beyond the scope of this article in our future work, including the educational effort, achievement, and outlook of MTO children and the determinants of housing choices and neighborhood outcomes over the course of the experiment. On the first issue, some MTO sites show modest achievement gains by the experimental group, and there is some evidence that girls in that group are getting better grades than their male counterparts—part of a larger pattern of results that favor girl movers and show real problems for boys who relocate, particularly in the domain of risky behavior (Orr et al. 2003). Also, adolescents and young adults in MTO are making choices about colleges and careers that we want to examine for the effects of relocation and neighborhood context. Finally, we believe that there are pressing questions, suggested by our results, that other researchers and policy experts should address, such as the prospects for integrated choice counseling. For example, what are the keys to designing and delivering effective counseling that maximizes families' choices in the linked domains of housing, schooling, and health and human services? And what rules and incentives are most important?

The MTO experiment failed to get children into better schools for two reasons: because it did not enable most families to move to and stay in high-performing school districts or attendance zones and because it did not address the limited resources of participating families and the logic they used to choose the most effective schools. But because housing choices *are* school choices for 7 of every 10 children in the United States who attend public schools, the limits of this particular relocation-only demonstration program for the inner-city poor should not dissuade policy makers and practitioners from making bolder, more savvy efforts in the future.

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