



Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Exploring the Effects of Housing
Instability and Mobility on Children



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Preface

This paper is the latest in a series of analyses by the Center for Housing Policy that seeks to shed light on the question, “What difference does affordable housing make in a family’s life?” In the 2005 report, *Something’s Gotta Give: Working Families and the Cost of Housing*, we examined the consequences for household budgets of living in unaffordable housing, showing that families with very high housing costs spend less on food, clothing, health care, and transportation.

In this paper, we focus on another important attribute of affordable housing – its perceived role in fostering residential stability. Many practitioners believe that this attribute of affordable housing – helping families gain control over if and when to move – is of critical importance, particularly for young children. To better understand the relationship between affordable housing and residential stability and the effects of mobility on children, we commissioned four research reports, each of which explores a different data set to provide insight into these questions. This brief presents a synthesis of the findings of these research reports.

The following are the four commissioned research reports on which this brief is based. The full reports are available on our website at www.nhc.org/child_mobility.html.

- *Housing Instability: Toward a Better Understanding of Frequent Residential Mobility Among America’s Urban Poor* by Sherri Lawson Clark – analyzes the ethnographic data set from “Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study” (referred to in this paper as the Three-City Study), which reports on 256 families in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio between 1999 and 2006
- *Residential Mobility, Housing Problems, and Child Outcomes in the Women’s Employment Study* by Robin Phinney – analyzes panel data from the “Women’s Employment Study,” a six-year survey of more than 500 low-income women in an urban Michigan county, initiated in 1997
- *Using the Making Connections Survey Data to Analyze Housing Mobility and Child Outcomes among Low-Income Families* by Nandinee K. Kutty – draws from the “Making Connections” survey data set, which includes information on 1,500 families collected at ten sites during two waves between 2002 and 2007
- *Analysis of 2005 American Housing Survey data* by Sandra Newman and Scott Holupka – data runs incorporate survey data collected from a national sample of approximately 55,000 housing units

Introduction

To better understand the effects of housing instability and mobility on children's development, the Center for Housing Policy commissioned analyses of three data sets that provide rich information on the mobility patterns of low-income families and how children in these families fare over time. Questions we were hoping to answer include:

- Do low-income families move more frequently than other households?
- How do moves affect children's well-being?
- Do moves tend to be planned or unplanned, and does this make a difference for the children or parents?
- To what extent is mobility (i.e., the act of moving from one place to another) associated with poor housing conditions?



Generally, the research suggests that low-income families are more likely to experience the disruption of a residential move than are other families. Moves can occur for a variety of reasons, but when they are involuntary or unplanned and frequent, they can have detrimental effects on children's outcomes. Overall, these findings are consistent with practitioners' views on the importance of housing assistance and counseling programs that help low-income families maintain affordable, high-quality housing in safe and amenity-rich neighborhoods. At the same time, however, additional research is needed to more fully examine and document the causal connection between affordable housing, residential stability, and strong child outcomes.

After a brief introduction to the data sources used to answer these questions, the remainder of this report will present key findings and implications for families, policymakers, housing providers, and other stakeholders.

Data Sources

The Center for Housing Policy identified three ongoing or recently completed research studies that provide the opportunity for a more detailed analysis of housing instability and mobility, and their effects on child outcomes:

- The Making Connections Survey tracks families at ten neighborhood sites across the U.S.¹ over three waves. Interviewers met with some 1,500 families between 2002 and 2004, again between 2005 and 2007, and once more between 2008 and 2010. In addition, researchers completed control sample interviews by telephone with approximately 700 households at each site. This data set provides insight into the extent to which families moved out of their starting neighborhood. (Mobility in this context refers to a change in neighborhood rather than housing unit.)
- The ethnographic component of the Three-City Study examined the longitudinal impact of welfare reform policies on 256 families in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. Beginning in 1999 and for the first 12 to 18 months of the study, ethnographers met with families on a monthly or semi-monthly basis, after which they re-convened every six months through mid-2003. Follow-up interviews

were conducted with a sub-sample of the Boston families through 2006. Unlike other data sets, this component of the Three-City Study uses an ethnographic research design, which includes more than 40 different interview protocols and participant-observations.

- The Women's Employment Study focuses on barriers to work among mothers in an urban Michigan county who received cash welfare assistance at the start of the study. Researchers completed five waves of interviews with more than 500 low-income women over six years between 1997 and 2003, asking questions about a range of topics including schooling, work experience and readiness, and physical and mental health status. The Women's Employment Study offers special insight into participants' experiences with involuntary mobility, defined here as an eviction, an episode of homelessness, or doubling up with others to share housing costs.

In addition to findings from these three projects, the Center for Housing Policy commissioned an analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Housing Survey, which collects and tracks detailed information on a representative sample of housing units across the country. We also draw on the substantial body of existing literature to explore the connections between housing mobility and child outcomes. Each of the reports prepared for this study contains an extensive literature review, which interested readers are encouraged to reference for more information.

With the notable exception of the American Housing Survey, these data are not representative of the entire country, nor are the data comparable across the different studies. Readers should view these data as snapshots of particular households in particular places. They help shed light on real conditions of real people and real neighborhoods, with an emphasis on the experiences of households with very low incomes. But additional research is needed to determine the extent to which the findings of these studies apply to other households and in other places.



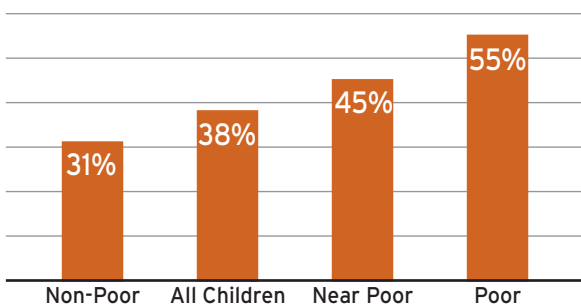
Do Low-Income Families Move More Frequently Than Other Households?

As shown in Figure 1, American Housing Survey data indicate that poor and near-poor families tend to move much more frequently than their higher-income neighbors and the general population. But even non-poor households move more often than one might expect.

The relatively high levels of mobility reflect a wide array of experiences from renting to owning or owning to renting; planned moves to a better neighborhood or bigger house or unplanned or involuntary moves resulting from eviction or foreclosure; single episodes of relocation or moves that are part of a longer pattern of frequent mobility.



FIGURE 1. Mobility in the Past 24 Months Among Children in Non-Poor, Near Poor, and Poor Families



Source: Newman, Sandra and Scott Holupka. 2009. Tabulations of 2005 American Housing Survey, prepared for the Center for Housing Policy.

The following sections look more closely at different types of mobility, including moves within and between neighborhoods, frequent or “hyper-mobility,” and the differences between planned and unplanned moves.

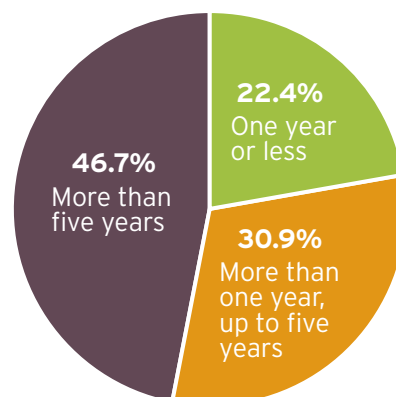
Neighborhood-Level Moves

The data used in preparing this analysis allow us to look not just at moves from one home to another, but also at neighborhood-level trends. With this information, we can determine whether families tend to stay within the same neighborhood or relocate

outside of neighborhood boundaries to new parts of the city and beyond.

As indicated in Figure 2, among participants in the Making Connections Survey, fewer than half (46 percent) of families had lived in their current neighborhood for more than five years. Some 22 percent had lived in the neighborhood for one year or less, and roughly 31 percent had lived in the neighborhood for one to five years.

FIGURE 2. Length of Time in Current Neighborhood



Source: Kuty, Nandinee K. 2008. Using the Making Connections Survey Data to Analyze Housing Mobility and Child Outcomes among Low-Income Families. Analysis of the Making Connections survey prepared for the Center for Housing Policy.

For households, remaining within the same neighborhood may provide a measure of stability, allowing children to stay enrolled in the same school and parents to continue to rely on familiar support networks. But, if children move from a district with under-performing schools to one with better schools, or from a neighborhood with high levels of violence to one that is much safer, a move to a new neighborhood may have a positive effect on children's outcomes.

Consider, for instance, the trade-offs made by Lila, a participant in the Three-City Study:



Lila blamed her son's teachers for his poor reading skills, and wished that she had the money to move to a different neighborhood with better schools or send him to private school. However, when given the opportunity to move to a neighborhood with a better school system, Lila hesitated [from] withdrawing her son from his school during the school year because he has so many friends at his current school and their residential mobility has caused a great deal of disruption in her son's life in the past.²

The extent to which families move within a neighborhood versus across neighborhoods also has implications for community development and other place-based initiatives that strive for positive changes within targeted communities. These impacts are discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

Frequent Moves

For a small share of families, frequent moves are a way of life. "Hyper-mobility" may be defined in a variety



of ways, but in general indicates a series of consecutive moves undertaken at a rate far greater than that experienced by the general population. While nearly 80 percent of participants in the Women's Employment Study moved one or more times over the six-year study period, some 20 percent could be characterized as "frequent movers" who moved more than six times in six years. This is one way to define hyper-mobility.

Hyper-mobility can present special challenges to children's well-being, both through direct effects on children (e.g., the stress of being uprooted or difficulty catching up with classmates at school) and as mediated through their parents (e.g., the parents' stress or preoccupation with details related to the move could affect their ability to be supportive of their children). A recent review of research on residential mobility found evidence of connections between frequent moves and behavioral problems in childhood and risk-taking behavior in adolescence.³ Frequent moves have also been associated with modest disruptions in access to health-care services, including an increased likelihood of shifts from one provider to another as the number of moves increases, and a lower rate of office visits for immunizations.⁴

Most notably, however, hyper-mobility has been shown to have a sharp impact on children's academic performance. Children who frequently move residences and/or change schools (conditions that sometimes but not always go together) tend to fare worse than their peers

in terms of educational outcomes and achievement. One study of sixth-graders in Chicago public schools found an educational gap of about one year between students who had changed schools four or more times and their peers who had not changed schools over a six-year period.⁵ While students who move only once appear able to recover lost ground and close the achievement gap in subsequent years, the negative effects of mobility appear to be cumulative and more difficult to overcome with subsequent moves.⁶ Similarly, among a sample of more than 4,000 children between the ages of 7 and 12, researchers found that those that had moved eight or more times had a greater likelihood of repeating a grade, experiencing a suspension or expulsion, and performing “below” or “near the bottom” of the class.⁷ For these “hyper-mobile” students (note the different definition of hyper-mobility), each additional move further increased the odds of having problems in school by almost 85 percent.

While families that experience hyper-mobility may be influenced by a variety of factors, frequent movers in the Women’s Employment Study (six or more times in a six-year period) tended to share several characteristics that may contribute to their instability. In general, families that experienced these high levels of mobility tended to be younger and have fewer children than other families. Frequent movers were

also more likely to be unmarried but cohabitating, have less than a high school education, and report poor mental health and a history of domestic violence, as compared with average movers or non-movers.

The experience of Delilah, another participant in the Three-City Study, illustrates how some of these factors may result in higher levels of mobility:

After marrying her second husband, Delilah’s residential mobility increased dramatically. In their first year of marriage, they moved five times in one year. She explains that they moved so often because her husband was not stable... [and] was physically and verbally abusive. When she tired of her husband’s abuse she would leave him and then the couple would re-unite and have to find another place to live. In some cases, Delilah felt her only choice for housing was to re-unite with her husband and move in with her husband’s relatives.



Colleen's story illustrates just how much instability some families experience:

Colleen grew up in public housing, and at age 14 was evicted with her mother due to nonpayment of rent. Following the eviction, Colleen and her mother frequently lived apart in homeless shelters, with family and friends, and in the hallways of their former housing development. Now 24, in the six years since Colleen's first son was born she moved 17 times. By the conclusion of the Three-City Study, Colleen was pregnant with a third child; her younger son was living with his grandfather and her older son had been placed in a mental hospital for children following a visit from a caseworker.

A wide range of often complex forces appears to drive frequent mobility, and residential instability in general – the formation and dissolution of households, an inability to afford one's housing costs, the loss of employment, the lack of a safety net, a desire for a shorter commute or a safer neighborhood, and so forth. The role of some of these factors is discussed in greater detail later in this report.

It is important to note, however, that mobility alone does not necessarily indicate distress. More than one in three participants in the Women's Employment Study became a homeowner at some point during the study period, with a total of 46 percent owning a home during one or more of the survey years. Among families in the Making Connections Survey, three out of every ten movers were characterized as "up and out" movers, many moving to neighborhoods where they experienced higher levels of satisfaction and optimism.



How Do Moves Affect Children's Well-Being?

As noted by Lawson Clark in her analysis of the Three-City Study, “housing instability does not occur in a vacuum and, rarely, is housing insecurity the only challenge that individuals and families have at any one time.” Despite the difficulty in isolating the causal effects of housing mobility and instability on child outcomes, the Women’s Employment Study and Making Connections Survey did uncover some relationships between mobility and child outcomes that merit review.

Mobility and Education

Not all moves result in a change in school, particularly when families stay within the same neighborhood; however, research indicates that both residential mobility (even without a change in school enrollment) and school mobility (with or without a residential move) can negatively affect children’s educational achievement. The pathways through which residential and school mobility may influence educational outcomes are varied and may be direct (e.g., through a disruption in instruction and curriculum as a result of changing schools or difficulty finding a quiet place to study or do homework before, during, and after moving) or indirect (e.g., severing peer networks and child care arrangements that reinforce learning and cognitive development or disruption caused by parents’ and children’s stress and anxiety related to moving).⁸

As noted above, students who move multiple times in a relatively brief period appear to be particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of residential or school mobility. For example, a study assessing standardized reading test scores among first- through sixth-grade students in Minnesota found that those who had moved three or more times scored on average 20 points lower than students who had not moved.⁹ The effects of moving were smaller, but also negative, for students who moved but stayed enrolled in the same school or within the same school district. Mobility appears to affect older students as well. A regression analysis of data from the *Panel Study of Income Dynamics* found that residential mobility has a significant, negative relationship with high school completion – that is, children who move between the

ages of 4 and 15 have a lower likelihood of finishing high school, particularly when those moves take place during critical developmental periods between the ages of 4 and 7 and during adolescence.¹⁰

Vivian, a participant in the Three-City Study provides a poignant example of how housing instability disrupted her education:

“Growing up, I never stayed at one school for a certain amount of time. I only stayed there for like two years at most. We moved around a lot here in the area, elementary and junior high. Of all the schools I went to, the one I probably got the most out of would be high school, because I stayed there for three years. I would say that everything I learned from school was probably from there.”



While mobility and housing instability can derail children’s educational achievement, mobility does not always lead to negative educational outcomes. As noted at the start of this section, many factors contribute to children’s outcomes, and parental involvement and enrollment in after-school or extra-curricular programs can help to mitigate the influence of otherwise difficult conditions. Children also differ in their level of resilience and ability to rapidly adapt to new surroundings. Moreover, some housing mobility programs help families to better afford the cost of housing in neighborhoods with stronger school systems. For children in these families, a change in neighborhood and school enrollment can have positive impacts on schooling. These issues are discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

Mobility and Health

Research on health problems among people experiencing homelessness provides the strongest evidence of the relationship between housing instability and adverse health outcomes – most notably through heightened stress levels, symptoms of depression and other psychological disorders, and higher incidence of ear infections, asthma, and other physical health conditions among children.¹¹ These impacts can also be seen among families that experience residential moves that fall short of homelessness – particularly among those facing forced or unplanned moves as a result of eviction or foreclosure (addressed in the next section). As with educational outcomes, the

effects may be felt directly by children or they may be mediated through parental stress and other pathways.

None of the reports commissioned for this paper looked specifically at health outcomes, but other studies have shown that – perhaps unsurprisingly – families facing imminent eviction exhibit high levels of stress.¹² Understandably, parenting under these conditions could prove challenging, ultimately affecting children’s mental health. Residential instability also has been shown to disrupt treatment regimens and continuity of care.¹³ For children who have a chronic disease or otherwise need ongoing medical treatment, residential moves can make it difficult to adhere to medication schedules and keep scheduled medical appointments.



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Do Moves Tend To Be Planned or Unplanned, and Does This Make a Difference for the Children or Parents?

Previous sections of this report look at frequent moves and moves that take place within and across neighborhoods. A third lens through which mobility may be examined accounts for the motivation behind the move: Do most individuals and families plan to move – whether in search of a bigger house, shorter commute, or safer neighborhood – or do moves tend to be unplanned – the result of financial distress, family strife, or an eviction, foreclosure, or other unforeseen event? Do planned and unplanned moves affect children and families differently?¹⁴

The data sets used to inform this report provide some insight into these questions. Of all the data sets analyzed for this paper, the American Housing Survey casts the widest net, collecting data on families at all income levels in communities across the country. As shown in Table 1, among families that reported moving in the past 24 months, the main reason given for moving – accounting for nearly one in five moves – was to move to a larger home. Other top motivations were to establish a new household and to move to a “better” home.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to use the American Housing Survey categories to assess whether moves are planned or unplanned. There are four categories of moves that are clearly and unambiguously “unplanned:” private displacement, disaster, eviction, and government displacement. But that does not mean that all moves falling into the other American Housing Survey categories are planned moves. Behind virtually any of the other available categories, one could expect to uncover at least some moves that could be characterized as unplanned. For example, someone who reports moving to “establish a new household” could have been kicked out by a parent or partner, or may be fleeing an abusive situation. Similarly, “change in tenure” could apply to a homeowner who has faced foreclosure and is now renting, or has been forced to sell his or her home after losing a job.



TABLE 1. Main Reason for Moving

Reason Given	Percent of Children
Move to a larger home	18.6
Establish a new household	9.9
Move to a better house	9.4
Moved for job	9.1
Other family/personal reason	7.1
To be closer to work	6.6
Change in tenure (renter to owner or vice versa)	6.6
Change in marital status	5.0
Desired lower cost/maintenance home	3.7
Other financial/employment reason	2.9
Private displacement (e.g., condo conversion)	0.8
Disaster (e.g., fire)	0.6
Evicted	0.5
Government displacement (e.g., public housing demolition)	0.2
<i>Other reason</i>	12.7
<i>Other housing reason</i>	5.2
<i>All reasons important</i>	1.1

Source: Newman and Holupka tabulations of 2005 American Housing Survey

Samantha's story provides some insight into the nuances that may be masked by the American Housing Survey's classifications:

Samantha had her first child at age 17; at the time she lived across the street from her boyfriend, the baby's father. While she preferred to remain at home with her mother, she eventually gave in to pressure from her boyfriend's family – “You already have a child with him. You need to be with him.” – and moved in with her boyfriend and his aunt and uncle. At 19, pregnant with their second child, Samantha married her boyfriend and after another year the couple got their own apartment. Eventually, after her husband became abusive and kicked her and the children out of the apartment, Samantha moved into a shelter and then back into her mother's home.

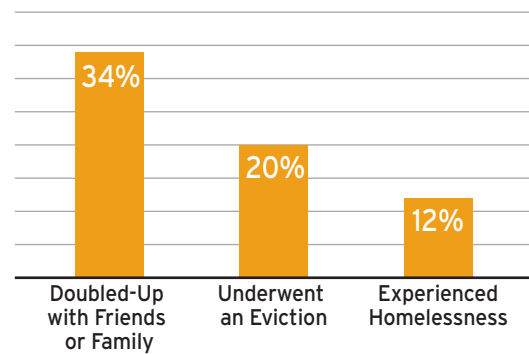
Using the categories identified in Table 1, many of Samantha's moves could be classified as “Other family/personal reason,” despite being involuntary or unplanned on Samantha's part.

As discussed below, other data sets referenced in the preparation of this paper indicate that among very low-income families, unplanned moves – also referred to as “forced” or “involuntary” moves – are fairly common. It is unclear to what extent this reflects trends among the particular populations being studied or whether unplanned moves are relatively common across a broader range of incomes. In any event, it is clear that more research is needed to unpack the reasons for families' moves along dimensions relevant to family and child well-being.

A Closer Look at the Research

In the Women's Employment Study researchers classified participants that had “experienced an eviction, homeless episode, or had ‘doubled up’ between survey years” as having experienced an “involuntary move.” Based on these factors, nearly 40 percent of participants in the study had experienced one or more involuntary moves during the six-year study period (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. Involuntary Mobility Among “Single-Parent Cases” Receiving Federal Welfare Assistance



Note: Categories do not add up to forty percent because households may have experienced more than one of these situations.

Source: Phinney, Robin. 2009. Residential Mobility, Housing Problems, and Child Outcomes in the Women's Employment Study. *Analysis of the Women's Employment Study prepared for the Center for Housing Policy.*

The Three-City Study identifies “forced moves” as those caused by eviction, fire, foreclosure, HOPE VI demolition, or intervention by the Department of Social Services, Child Protective Services, or Department of Child and Family Services. Collectively, these circumstances represent the leading reason for mobility given by families participating in the ethnographic portion of the study (other reasons include “union formation/dissolution,” “job/wage changes,” and “purchased home,” among others).

As shown in Table 2, the American Housing Survey, Women's Employment Study, and Three-City Study all classify unplanned moves in different ways, making it difficult to compare the experience of families across different studies or data sets. Further complicating matters, actual rates of unplanned mobility may be undercounted: Describing participants in

TABLE 2. Reasons for Moving – Comparison of Factors Characterizing Unplanned Moves

	American Housing Survey	Three-City Study	Women's Employment Study
Conversion to condo or cooperative	X		
Disaster loss (fire, flood, etc.)	X	X	
Doubling up		X	X
Eviction	X	X	X
Family Services or other intervention		X	
Foreclosure		X	
Homeless episode		X	X
HOPE VI demolition or other government displacement	X	X	
Owner moves in to unit	X		
Repairs/unfit for occupancy	X	X	

The Making Connections Survey does not ask participants to identify reason(s) for moving.

the Three-City Study, researchers note that many residents experiencing affordability issues moved out of their apartment before they could be evicted. Unless the family subsequently became homeless or doubled-up with friends or family, the move would not be captured as unplanned, involuntary, or forced by any of the studies referenced in this report, although most would characterize mobility under these circumstances as a stressful and potentially destabilizing experience.

Heightened levels of unplanned, involuntary, or forced moves also may reflect real differences in the families included in these specialized samples. To be eligible to participate in the Three-City Study, families had to have household incomes at or below 200

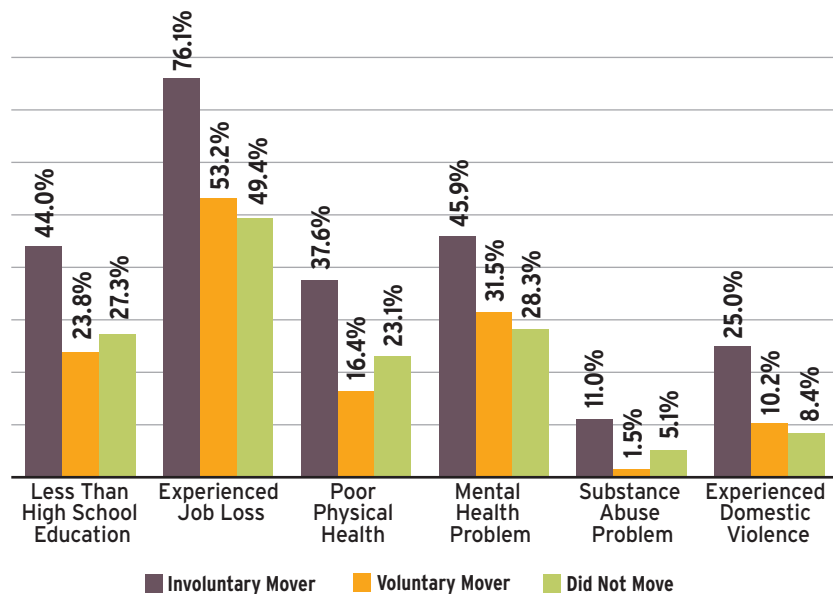
percent of the poverty line; the Women's Employment Study limited participation to women receiving federal welfare assistance.¹⁵ These groups may face more challenges than others, leaving them vulnerable to higher incidences of unplanned, involuntary, or forced moves.

Who Experiences Unplanned Moves?

The Women's Employment Study provides unique insight into the characteristics of families that experienced involuntary moves during the study period, as compared with those that did not. As shown in Figure 4, the study revealed that involuntary movers tend to face an array of circumstances that likely contribute to their housing instability, including lower levels of education, job loss, and poor mental or physical health.

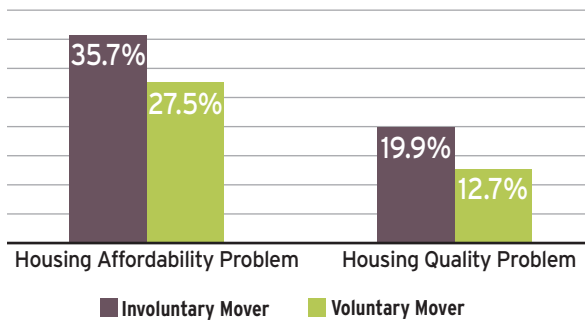
Notably, involuntary movers in the Women's Employment Study also experienced pre-move housing affordability and housing quality problems at a higher rate than voluntary movers (see Figure 5), and tended to have

FIGURE 4. Characteristics of Non-Movers and Movers Prior to Moving



Source: Phinney analysis of the Women's Employment Study. Note that all variables were measured in the year prior to moving except for high school education, which was measured for both movers and non-movers at the baseline interview.

FIGURE 5. Experience of Movers in the Year Prior to Moving



Source: Phinney analysis of the Women's Employment Study

higher levels of transportation barriers, meaning they lacked access to a car or driver's license.

All of these factors, combined, could present significant obstacles to finding and maintaining a stable home. While families enrolled in this and other studies may not be representative of the population at large, their stories are real and their experiences may well have significant implications for children.

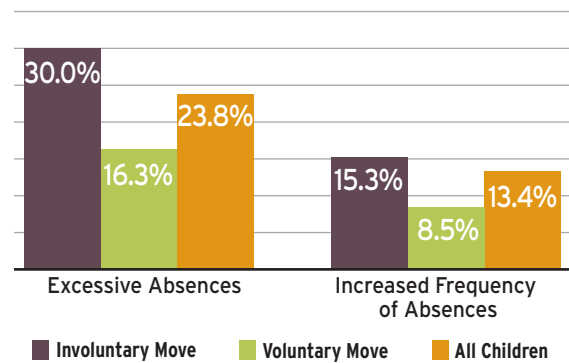
How Do Unplanned Moves Affect Families and Children?

Earlier in this report we described potential connections between residential instability and children's educational achievement and health outcomes. Evidence from the Women's Employment Study indicates that unplanned, involuntary, or forced



moves may be associated with negative effects on children and families. For example, as shown in Figure 6, children who underwent involuntary moves were significantly more likely to register excessive school absences or to increase the frequency with which they were absent after the move, as compared with voluntary movers.

FIGURE 6. School Absenteeism Among Voluntary and Involuntary Movers in the Year Following a Move



Source: Phinney analysis of the Women's Employment Study.

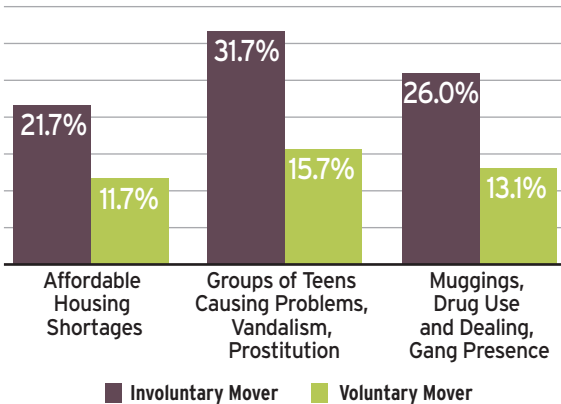
Involuntary movers also have more problems getting around after the move. More than 40 percent of involuntary movers faced a transportation barrier before moving, as compared with 28.5 percent of voluntary movers. While roughly 10 percent of both voluntary and involuntary movers saw an improvement in transportation access after moving, transportation barriers worsened for a statistically significant 11 percent of involuntary movers after moving, as compared with only 4 percent of voluntary movers.

Certain questions that provide additional insight on the effects of planned and unplanned moves were only presented to Women's Employment Study participants during select survey waves. For example, families who moved between 1998 and 1999 were asked a series of questions about neighborhood quality. As indicated in Figure 7, among these respondents, involuntary movers also experienced a greater incidence of neighborhood problems following the move.

One potential explanation for these discrepancies in post-move neighborhood quality is that families that

Voluntary movers in the Women’s Employment Study had significantly higher housing cost burdens and fewer housing quality problems after the move – a relationship that persisted even after accounting for other characteristics that may affect mobility.

FIGURE 7. Neighborhood Problems Among Voluntary and Involuntary Movers Following a Move Between 1998 and 1999



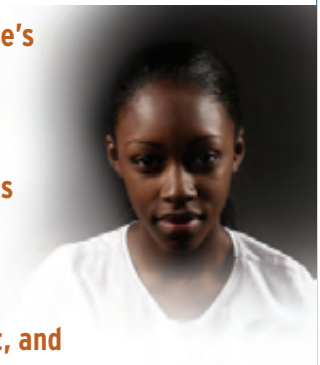
Source: Phinney analysis of the Women’s Employment Study.

move voluntarily likely have a greater opportunity to exercise free choice in selecting their new homes and neighborhoods, being mindful of the trade-offs they may be making in the process. Relative to their pre-move situation, voluntary movers in the Women’s Employment Study had significantly higher housing cost burdens and fewer housing quality problems after the move – a relationship that persisted even after accounting for other characteristics that may affect mobility. Neither of these variables was experienced at significant levels before the move, suggesting that voluntary movers do not tend to be “pushed out” by high housing costs or poor quality housing, but rather tend to be “pulled” to safer neighborhoods and higher-cost, better quality homes.

In contrast, before the move, involuntary movers tend to experience high housing cost burdens and housing quality problems. Neither of these characteristics is significantly associated with involuntary movers after the move; rather, housing affordability and quality improve for some involuntary movers and worsen for

others. The experiences of Janel, a participant in the Three-City Study, may help to illustrate the different forces at play and choices that families make as they move from one set of circumstances to the next:

Janel moved in with her fiancée’s mother after being evicted from her Section 8-subsidized apartment. After a few months she found her own place to live. She knows that her new neighborhood is not the safest, and keeps a close watch on her children, saying that she knows where they are at all times. “Where I was at was kinda better because of the hanging out and shooting (referring to her current residence). They didn’t have all of that on that block...they probably had a lot of teenagers but not on that block.” Her new apartment, however, features three bedrooms and two bathrooms, an in-unit washer and dryer, and hardwood floors which, in Janel’s opinion, justify the trade-off of moving into a higher-crime neighborhood.



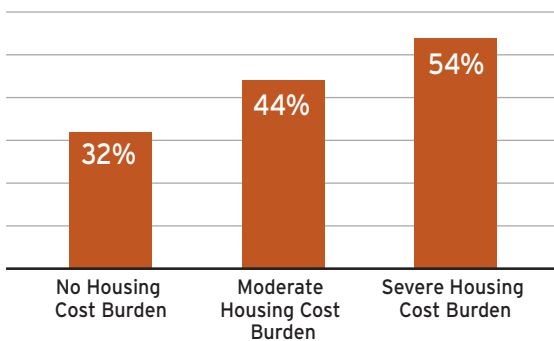
It is important to remember, however, that involuntary movers tend to start from worse housing and neighborhood conditions, relative to voluntary movers, and gains in housing quality or affordability may not always result in a dramatically improved quality of life.

To What Extent is Mobility (i.e., the Act of Moving From One Place to Another) Associated with Poor Housing Conditions?

That many low-income families live in low-quality homes and spend more than they can afford on housing has been well-established; the impacts of these circumstances are less well-understood.

Data from the 2005 American Housing Survey and presented in Figure 8 clearly illustrate an association between housing cost burden and the likelihood of having moved recently. At the same time, however, it appears that income may be an even stronger driver of mobility than housing cost burden.

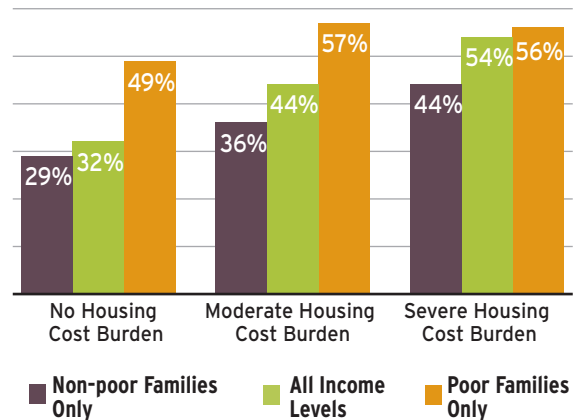
FIGURE 8. Percent of Children That Moved in the Past 24 Months by Cost Burden, All Income Levels



Source: Newman and Holupka tabulations of 2005 American Housing Survey.

As shown in Figure 9, the relationship of income to housing cost burden holds up well for non-poor families, suggesting that a high housing cost burden may be associated with residential instability. Regardless of the share of income spent on housing, however, non-poor families tend to move less frequently than their low-income neighbors. Among poor households alone, a nearly identical share of severely cost-burdened and moderately cost-burdened families had moved recently; notably, so had nearly half of poor children in affordable housing, suggesting that poverty has a particularly strong association with mobility. In

FIGURE 9. Percent of Children That Moved in the Past 24 Months by Income and Cost Burden



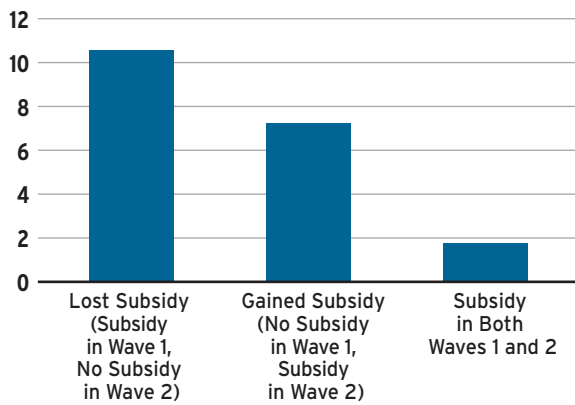
Source: Newman and Holupka tabulations of 2005 American Housing Survey.

the case of poor families, the effect of income may swamp any independent effect of housing cost burden.

The Making Connections Survey also provides direct insight into the linkages between housing costs and mobility (in this case moves to a different neighborhood). Among families participating in the survey, those that were unable to pay a utility bill or make a rent or mortgage payment in the previous 12 months were significantly more likely to move out of their neighborhood during the study (41 percent of movers versus 31 percent of non-movers). Losing a housing subsidy, such as a public housing unit or a portable tenant-based voucher, also had a huge effect on the likelihood that a Making Connections family would move between Waves 1 and 2 of the study.

As shown in Figure 10, families that lost a housing subsidy were more than 10 times more likely to move neighborhoods than families that did not have a housing subsidy during the study period, and more than 5 times more likely to move than families that maintained assistance across both waves of the

FIGURE 10. Likelihood of Mobility Among Making Connections Families That Lose, Gain, or Maintain a Housing Subsidy



NOTE: A number larger than 1.0 indicates a greater likelihood of mobility between Waves 1 and 2 as compared with families that lack a housing subsidy; the larger the number, the greater the likelihood.

Source: Kutty analysis of Making Connections survey.

study. Not surprisingly, families that gained a housing subsidy between Waves 1 and 2 of the study were also more likely to move than families without a subsidy, likely in search of better housing conditions or into a public housing unit. Interestingly, maintaining housing assistance across waves was also associated with an increased likelihood of mobility, albeit by a much smaller magnitude.¹⁶

Poverty, housing unaffordability and housing subsidies are not the only drivers of mobility; as described in the Three-City Study, “housing instability and stability are multi-faceted and driven by a host of factors including interpersonal relationships, economic hardships, policy regulations, and personal choices,” among other things. Margerita’s story is illustrative:

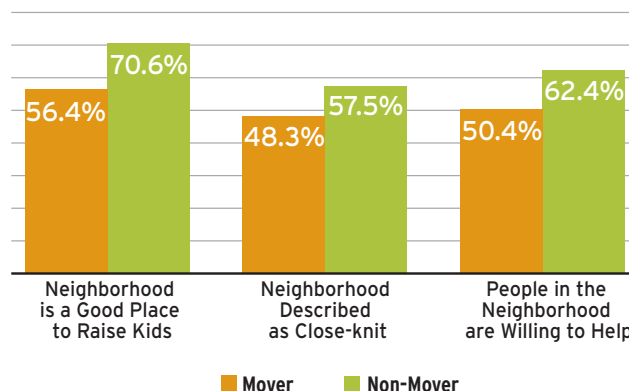
Margerita is a mother of three children aged 15, 5, and 1 who has lived on and off with Jesus, the father of her children, since age 19 when she found out she was pregnant with their first child. They lived in an apartment with Jesus’s six roommates until their relationship started to deteriorate and Margerita moved into her own apartment with

her newborn son. After two years, the owner decided to sell the building, forcing Margerita and her son to find another place to live or pay the higher rent the owners were charging. Finding that she could not locate any housing that she could afford, Margerita moved back in with Jesus in a three-flat home outside the city. While her children [now] have the opportunity to grow up with both parents, she laments living far from her family and social network and has found living outside the city to be harder and more expensive.

Other factors that may influence mobility include:

- **Neighborhood quality** – Making Connections families that stayed in their neighborhoods between Waves 1 and 2 of the study were more likely than movers to have a favorable view of their neighborhood. Neighborhood stayers tend to describe their Wave 1 neighborhood as “close-knit” and a good place to raise a child; and to characterize their neighbors as “willing to help,” suggesting that a positive view of the neighborhood and good relationships with neighbors may be a stabilizing factor (see Figure 11).

FIGURE 11. Perceptions of Neighborhood Quality Among Neighborhood Movers and Non-Movers



Source: Kutty analysis of Making Connections survey.



A related finding indicated that a greater share of movers to new neighborhoods expected that their Wave 1 neighborhood would get worse in the future, as compared with non-movers, suggesting that neighborhood quality may be both a factor that influences residents to stay and, when perceived to be on the decline, “pushes” them to seek out a new community.

- **Job loss** – Both the Women’s Employment Study and Making Connections Survey found a relationship between job loss and mobility: Nearly two-thirds of Women’s Employment Study movers had lost a job between the last two waves of interviews, compared with only 49 percent of those who did not move during that period. Similarly, Making Connections families that gained a job were less likely to move neighborhoods, while those that lost a job were more likely to do so.
- **Changes in household composition** – Among participants in the Making Connections Survey, families that experienced an increase or a decrease in the number of parents present were significantly more likely to move to a new neighborhood between Waves 1 and 2 of the study than families that had no change in parental composition. Similarly, among families in the Three-City Study, “social relationships”

and, specifically, union formation or dissolution, proved to be behind many moves. Veronica, a participant in the study, provides an example:

Following her parents’ divorce in Pennsylvania, Veronica moved with her mother to another house. Her mother met and married another man and they moved back to Hartford, CT. Veronica lived there with her mother and step-father until the age of 14 or 15 when her mother and step-father moved back to Puerto Rico, leaving Veronica with a family friend. Over the next two years, Veronica’s father brought her to New York to live with him, and then her mother returned from Puerto Rico and sent for her to come back to Connecticut. Her mother went back to Puerto Rico and Veronica came to Boston to stay with her brother. When tensions rose between her brother and his wife, Veronica moved in with her boyfriend and his family.

Residents of public housing may be particularly vulnerable to an involuntary move to a new unit following a change in household composition that increases or decreases household size – such as the departure of an uncle or grandparent – as housing authorities may relocate families to appropriately sized units if such apartments are available. For example, Dina, a participant in the Three-City Study and mother of four children, was given notice that she had to move to a smaller public housing unit when her oldest child got her own apartment. Dina was able to negotiate with the housing authority to stay within the same apartment complex, although she will need to change apartments when a smaller unit becomes available.

- **Other household characteristics** – Among participants in the Making Connections Survey, households with a post-college education were significantly less likely to move neighborhoods than those with less education.

Implications for Research and Policy Development

Our examination of how mobility may affect children underscores both the importance of this topic and the challenges involved in its study. Frequent moves do appear to be associated with negative outcomes for children, but not all moves have the same impact and some moves may actually be good for children. The following are some thoughts on the implications of our analysis for future research and policy development:

➤ **Improved data on planned and unplanned mobility** – Our analysis suggests that the circumstances under which moves occur may well be a significant factor in understanding the effects of mobility on children. However, much remains unknown about the extent to which low-income families undergo unplanned moves. The multiple ways in which unplanned, forced, and involuntary moves are labeled and characterized reveals the need for better information about the frequency with which unplanned moves take place. This is both a measurement issue and a conceptual issue. Clearly, evictions and foreclosures deserve to be classified as “unplanned moves.” But what about moves prompted by extreme housing cost burdens or a desire to escape a violent neighborhood or poor housing conditions? To the extent that families in these circumstances may feel compelled to move more quickly or accept an alternative living situation that they would not have chosen but-for the pressures of their living environment, these moves

may well lead to less-than-desirable outcomes for both the parents and children. But it remains to be seen whether this linkage is well-supported by the data.

A key first step to better understanding this linkage is to unpack families’ reasons for moving, examining more closely both the objective factors (e.g., pre-move housing cost burdens and housing quality, evictions, etc.) and the subjective ways in which families understand their moves. A second step would be to examine the relationships between these different types of moves and child outcomes. To the extent that unplanned moves – or certain types of unplanned moves – adversely affect children, targeted policy responses might



be warranted to help families and children maintain greater stability. As used here, stability refers not to simply staying put, but to having the freedom to stay put for as long as one likes, as well as the freedom to plan one's moves to maximize their benefits.

- **Research on the connections between housing assistance and mobility** – The Making Connections Survey suggests that housing assistance may have an important effect on mobility. While the highest levels of mobility were experienced by families that gained or lost housing assistance, families that retained housing assistance between Waves 1 and 2 of the study nevertheless had higher rates of mobility as compared with unassisted neighbors. Other analyses have found surprisingly short lengths of stay among non-elderly non-disabled families with housing assistance.¹⁷ Further study of the extent to which (and circumstances under which) families that receive housing assistance move could help to identify reasons for their mobility, distinguish between positive and

negative moves from the perspective of healthy families and children, and generate recommendations for strengthening subsidy programs to improve child outcomes. Closer examination of mobility counseling programs, which have been shown to enable families to move to lower-crime neighborhoods and may also help parents relocate to neighborhoods that have high-performing schools, could also prove instructive.

This research should distinguish between public housing and housing vouchers, as the latter allows families to move and keep their assistance. In addition, it would be useful to better understand the extent to which eviction prevention and other supportive services delivered at housing developments and/or in partnership with other housing providers could promote stability and enrich children's health and educational outcomes and overall quality of life.

- **Consideration of strategies for adapting community development initiatives to high-mobility neighborhoods** – At every site

in the Making Connections Survey, more than half of the families with children in Wave 1 of the study had moved by Wave 2, three years later. Constant churning of the neighborhood population can present a serious obstacle to community development initiatives that target their efforts on families within a specific geographic area. Researchers may wish to consider strategies for adapting these initiatives to ensure that the benefits of stronger investments in families and children are not lost every time a family moves outside neighborhood boundaries.



References

- ¹ Sites include neighborhoods in Denver, CO; Des Moines, IA; Indianapolis, IN; San Antonio, TX; White Center (Seattle), WA; Hartford, CT; Milwaukee, WI; Oakland, CA; Providence, RI; and Louisville, KY. All neighborhoods are characterized by survey sponsors as “disadvantaged,” with relatively high levels of poverty, low rates of homeownership and college completion, and a low share of households with working adults. Neither the cities nor the neighborhoods were selected to be nationally representative for research purposes.
- ² All profiles of individual families in this paper come from Lawson Clark, Sherri. 2010. *Housing Instability: Toward a Better Understanding of Frequent Residential Mobility Among America’s Urban Poor*. Analysis of the Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study ethnographic data set prepared for the Center for Housing Policy.
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- ⁴ Pettit, Kathryn L.S., G. Thomas Kingsley, and Claudia Coulton with Jessica Cigna. May 2003. *Neighborhoods and Health: Building Evidence for Local Policy*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- ⁵ Kerbow, David. October 1996. *Patterns of Urban Student Mobility and Local School Reform*. Technical Report. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk, Report No. 5.
- ⁶ Kerbow, David, Carlos Azcoitia, and Barbara Buell. 2003. “Student Mobility and Local School Improvement in Chicago.” *Journal of Negro Education* 72(1): 158-164.
- ⁷ Tucker, C. Jack, Jonathan Marx and Larry Long. 1998. “Moving On: Residential Mobility and Children’s School Lives.” *Sociology of Education* 71(2): 111-129.
- ⁸ See Howes, Carollee. 1988. “Relations between Child Care and Schooling.” *Developmental Psychology* 24: 53-57; Howes, Carollee and Phyllis Stewart. 1987. “Child’s Play with Adults, Toys, and Peers: An Examination of Family and Child-Care Influences.” *Developmental Psychology* 23: 423-430.
- ⁹ Kids Mobility Project. 1988. *Kids Mobility Project Report*. Hennepin County, MN: Hennepin County Office of Planning and Development and Community Connections. For more evidence of mobility’s impact on education achievement, see: Mantzicopoulos, Panayota and Dana J. Knutson. 2000. “Head Start Children: School Mobility and Achievement in the Early Grades.” *Journal of Educational Research* 93(5): 305-311; Moore, Kristin Anderson, Sharon Vandivere, and Jennifer Ehrle. 2000. “Turbulence and Child Well-Being.” *New Federalism: National Survey of America’s Families*. Series B, No. B-16.
- ¹⁰ Havemen, Robert, Barbara Wolfe, and James Spaulding. 1991. “Childhood Events and Circumstance Influencing High School Completion.” *Demography* 28(1): 133-157.
- ¹¹ Haber, Mason G. and Paul A. Toro. 2004. *Homelessness, Mental Health, and Economic Justice*. PsyACT Policy Brief. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University, Research Group on Homelessness and Poverty; Redlener, Irwin and Denis Johnson. 1999. *Still in Crisis: The Health Status of New York’s Homeless Children*. New York: The Children’s Health Fund; Zima, Bonnie T., Kenneth B. Wells, and Howard E. Freeman. 1994. “Emotional and Behavioral Problems and Severe Academic Delays Among Sheltered Homeless Children in Los Angeles County.” *American Journal of Public Health* 84(2): 260-264.
- ¹² Guzman, Carolina, Rajiv Bhatia, and Chris Durazo. 2005. Anticipated Effects of Residential Displacement on Health: Results from Quantitative Research. Research Summary. Prepared by the San Francisco Department of Public Health and South of Market Community Action Network.
- ¹³ See, for example, Bamberger, Joshua D., et al. 2000. “Helping the Urban Poor Stay with Antiretroviral HIV Drug Therapy.” *American Journal of Public Health* 90(5): 699-071 and Kinchen, Kraig and James D. Wright. 1991. “Hypertension Management in Health Care for the Homeless Clinics: Results from a Survey.” *American Journal of Public Health* 81(9): 1163-1165.
- ¹⁴ It is important to note that this report characterizes planned and unplanned moves from the perspective of the parent or guardian only. Children may have different perspectives on whether a move is planned or unplanned, voluntary or involuntary, which are not considered in the context of this report but may nonetheless have an effect on how they fare.
- ¹⁵ Participation in the Women’s Employment Study was open to women receiving federal welfare assistance as “single-parent cases,” a group distinct from single-parent households. While the sample was composed predominately of single mothers, roughly 10 percent of the participants were married at the start of the study.
- ¹⁶ For additional analysis of housing assistance and mobility among Making Connections families see Kingsley, Thomas G. and Christopher Hayes. 2008. *Housing Assistance in Making Connections Neighborhoods*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Kingsley and Hayes did not find evidence of a statistically significant relationship between families’ receipt of housing assistance at baseline and rates of mobility between survey waves.
- ¹⁷ Lubell, Jeff, Mark Shroder, and Barry Steffen. 2003. “Work Participation and Length of Stay in HUD-Assisted Housing.” *Cityscape* 69(2). See also: Thompson, Dianne T. 2007. “Evaluating Length of Stay in Assisted Housing Programs: A Methodological Note.” *Cityscape* 9(1). Using a different methodological approach, Thompson finds a longer length of stay for residents of assisted housing than Lubell, Shroder, and Steffen.