

Why Poor People Move (and Where They Go): Residential Mobility, Selection and Stratification

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“I would like to reiterate my impression that we know very little about how "voluntary" anybody's choices about where to live are... Some surveys ask questions about preferences for racial composition. But I don't think a standardized survey questionnaire can probe what we need to know, which is what people take into account when they make decisions, what neighborhoods did they consider, what did they view as the pluses and minuses of the alternatives...Of course we have no information at all about what these people were thinking... I tend to think about housing choice as constrained choice. For example, maybe most African Americans could manage to live in less segregated settings than they do now if that were their top priority. But there are other priorities, like cost, familiarity, proximity to family and friends ... and the survey data also suggests a declining willingness to be the pioneer black family in a white neighborhood. The big advantage for white families is that when they take these factors into account, their choice set still includes neighborhoods with good schools and low crime rate...I am uncomfortable speculating in this way... I would feel more satisfied with this approach if it were reinforced by good fieldwork...” (John Logan, Community and Urban Sociology Listserve Discussion, January 2008)

For decades, neighborhood context has been a major focus of social science research, and its myriad implications for the social, developmental and economic life chances of children and families have been extensively documented (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan and Aber, 1997; Furstenberg, et al, 1999; Sampson et. al. 2002; Wilson, 1996). Evidence that children and adults fare worse on most important indicators of quality of life and socioeconomic attainment when they live in high poverty neighborhoods has been of primary concern (ibid.; Harding, 2003; Acevedo-Garcia et al, 2004; Crane, 1991; Sampson et al, 2008). Classic work in sociology has identified some of the structural mechanisms that lead to high levels of racial segregation and concentrated poverty in American cities (Massey and Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987; 1996). In response to these consistent findings and the structural forces that shape them, a number of policy interventions to help families escape ghetto poverty were implemented over the last twenty years (Orr et al, 2003; Popkin et al, 2004).

This literature on neighborhood effects and the subsequent research examining policy responses has generated considerable interest in determining whether poor families and children will experience appreciable gains in educational attainment and economic well being as a result of moving to more affluent and less segregated communities (DeLuca and Dayton, 2009; Ludwig et al, 2008; Clampet-Lundquist and Massey, 2008; Sampson, 2008). However, estimating neighborhood effects is complicated by the ‘selection problem’: what leads families to pick a certain neighborhood is probably also related to other aspects of the family that affect child development and household income (Mayer & Jencks 1990; Moffitt, 2005). Recent developments in econometrics and experimental design have raised

the bar for estimating causal effects, making it possible to see what happens when theoretically similar families live in different kinds of neighborhoods. Often, the results from these approaches turn out two ways: the estimates from observational data (using advanced econometric methods) point to statistically significant (small to moderate) effects of neighborhoods on some outcomes, like dropout or teen pregnancy (Sampson et al, 2002; Harding, 2007; Galster et al, 2007); experimental estimates show no effect or mixed effects of an intervention meant to improve the neighborhood quality of poor families (Orr et al, 2003; Kling et al; Clampet-Lundquist and Massey, 2008; Ludwig et al, 2008). In the first case, the results can often still be criticized as subject to selection bias, since the effects of social context might be mistaken for family effects or some unobserved characteristics that lead families to choose certain neighborhoods. In the second case, null results from experimental designs can lead scholars and policymakers to conclude that interventions to improve the quality of neighborhoods will not improve family and child outcomes. In both cases, we are still left without any idea how family dynamics and previous experiences shape how poor families end up in better or worse communities and how they engage with the changes in opportunity structure when presented with them. Despite the significant implications, little research examines the reasons why poor families move, how they select neighborhoods, and the implications of these processes for understanding social policy interventions.

Prominent researchers in the field have suggested that we cannot understand neighborhood effects without understanding housing and mobility decisions (Galster, 2003; Brooks-Gunn et al, 1997; Logan, 2008 in quote above). We attempt to answer the call for this research to explore how families choose neighborhoods and the implications of these mobility decisions. Through intensive fieldwork with 140 poor African American families in two segregated cities, this study captures the motivating factors, decision making processes and experiences that keep most low income African American families trapped in poor, segregated, high crime communities. Unlike previous studies of neighborhood effects, we do not try to control for selection bias. Instead, we focus our attention directly on studying the “messiness” that is selection bias, how and why families move to some neighborhoods and not others and how the structural conditions of urban poverty influence individual level orientations and behaviors around neighborhood choice. In particular, we overturn common wisdom in the literature on residential mobility and neighborhood effects by showing that most moves and neighborhood locations among poor minority families aren’t the result of making choices at all. In fact, the involuntary nature of residential mobility in poor communities is a direct cause (and eventual effect) of sustained segregation for these families.

Why Do Families Move and Where Do They Go?

By the early 20th century, mobility was seen as indicative of a character flaw, an inability to maintain social relationships in one’s community. Research on social ecology in Chicago prompted concerns that residential transience was contributing to problems of urban decay, as studies noted associations between residential mobility and mental hospital admissions, juvenile delinquency and crime in city neighborhoods (Shaw and McKay, 1942; Farris and Dunham, 1939; Henry and Short, 1954). As a result of government funding aimed at “curing mobility”, Peter Rossi carried out a groundbreaking study in Philadelphia that overturned that common belief that mobile families are

“pathological” and suggested that families move instead because of changing needs at different points in the life cycle, which lead to a need for “housing adjustment” (Rossi, 1980; Rossi and Shlay, 1982). Later work in economics focused on how families choose housing that maximizes utility within budget constraints, or, satisfies consumption needs within a certain price range (Kennedy and Finkel, 1994), while sociological work focused on the factors that determined residential satisfaction (e.g., Speare, Goldstein and Frey, 1976). In general, most of the residential mobility literature framed moving out as “moving up”, which is also consistent with Blau and Duncan’s (1967) idea that part of social mobility was social “motility”. Thus, locational attainment was thought of as one way families can acquire more human capital—that is, people move because they want “bigger and better things” for themselves and their families.

More recent work suggests that white and black households do not follow the same mobility patterns. When white individuals (with high levels of education) move, they tend to move longer distances to attend college or start new jobs (Fischer, 2002; Schacter, 2004). Whites almost always move between white neighborhoods and between non-poor tracts (South and Crowder, 1997; 1998). Black families are less likely than whites to convert human capital into desirable neighborhood amenities such as low crime and other resources (Alba, Logan and Bellair 1994; Massey and Denton, 1987; Logan and Alba, 1993, 1991). They also have difficulty translating economic resources into housing, and blacks are much less likely to turn residential dissatisfaction into a move (South and Deane, 1993; Crowder, 2001). This leads to the common finding that when poor black families make residential changes, they move into white areas less often and exit white areas more often than white families (South and Crowder, 1997; Gramlich, Laren and Sealand, 1992, Massey, Gross and Shibuya, 1994). Recent research has demonstrated that blacks also have a high rate of moving into poor neighborhoods once they have been in a low poverty neighborhood, suggesting that blacks’ tenure in low poverty areas is precarious (South, Crowder and Chavez, 2005).

Decades ago, some researchers introduced the idea that *voluntary* mobility occurs mostly for educated whites (cf. McAllister, Kaiser and Butler, 1971; Stokols and Shumaker, 1982), but that blacks were more likely to face exogenous shocks that lead to involuntary, often shorter distance mobility (Fairchild and Tucker, 1982). Newman and Owens (1982) noted that poor minority families are often displaced as a result of reinvestment in some neighborhoods (which drives up rent and housing costs), disinvestment in other neighborhoods (which contributes to physical deterioration and abandonment), and urban policy and renewal programs that lead to demolition and property acquisition. Other causes of forced mobility include evictions, poor housing quality and domestic violence, and some estimate that these forced moves account for more relocations among the poor than planned moves (Bartlett, 1997; Schafft, 2006; Crowley, 2003). The HOPE VI initiatives, which tear down high rise public housing and replace developments with mixed income communities, can also displace families with no guarantee of relocation to stable areas (Clampet-Lundquist, 2004; Kotlowitz, 2002).

However, in comparison to the exploding interest in neighborhood effects and urban poverty during the period from the late 1980s through the 2000s, the specific conditions and determinants of residential mobility among the poor have gone largely unexamined. The effects of “place” on families

and children is prominent in the field, as is the research on policies that get families out of high poverty communities. The question of *how* families get from one neighborhood to another has received less attention. Research predicting the neighborhood attainment of blacks versus whites and poor versus non-poor families abounds (cf. South and Crowder, 1997, 1998), but the actual processes through which locational attainment occurs have gone unexamined. Instead of examining mobility processes in depth, research has instead tended to rely on a relatively static set of explanations for segregated residential patterns. To summarize a vast literature, these include: structural processes that exclude African Americans from white neighborhoods¹ and racial preferences. Structural forces like discrimination in housing and lending markets are widely acknowledged explanations for segregation and higher neighborhood poverty rates among blacks. While overt practices like blockbusting and redlining are no longer common, audit studies show that blacks are often steered toward certain neighborhoods, or are less likely to be told about vacant units than whites (Massey and Lundy 2001, Yinger 1985; Galster and Godfrey, 2005; see also Massey and Denton 1993). While racial covenants that prohibit houses to be sold to African-Americans are now illegal, deed restrictions and exclusionary zoning maintain economic segregation, and can function to separate wealthy whites from minorities (Espino 2006; Banerjee and Verma 2006).

The literature concerning the residential preferences of Whites and African-Americans posits that continued segregation is largely a function of the preferences of racial and ethnic groups to live with other members of similar background. Recent work has demonstrated that whites prefer to move into neighborhoods with low concentrations of minority families (Emerson, Yaukey and Chai, 2002; Charles, 2006; Ellen, 2000) and some researchers emphasize whites' avoidance of blacks as a significant cause of segregation (Quillian, 2001; Sampson and Sharkey, 2008; Charles, 2005)². Despite blacks' higher expressed preference for integration (see also Farley et al 1994, Krysan and Farley 2002), Clark (1991) argues that white preferences for higher percent-white neighborhoods creates a gap that makes it unlikely that an integrated neighborhood equilibrium will be maintained. Furthermore, he finds that blacks tend to move to higher percent black neighborhoods than would be expected by their preferences (1992). Thernstrom and Thernstrom (1997) suggest that blacks experience a certain amount of comfort in black neighborhoods, and that they would hesitate to move due to a residential mobility program such as Moving to Opportunity (230-31). They suggest that "one of the characteristics that many find attractive is the presence of a "critical mass" of other people of the same race"(225), and that this, rather than discriminatory real estate practices such as steering, is responsible for the continued lack of integration.

Examinations of black residential preferences by other scholars come to different conclusions. Using survey data in Los Angeles, Bobo and Zubrinsky (1996), find that while all racial and ethnic groups express in-group affinity, this does not correlate with residential preference. Similarly, other

¹ The 'economic resources' differential argument is less likely to fully explain segregation patterns, given the many studies that take socioeconomic status into account and still find differences in the locations of black and white households (Quillian, 2002; Massey and Denton, 1993).

² These findings are not without debate however. See Harris (1999) for evidence that whites avoid black neighborhoods not because of race, but because of 'proxies' for neighborhood quality that often accompany areas with high black populations.

researchers find that the desire to live with one's own race has a much smaller impact on residential preferences than out-group directed racial attitudes and stereotypes (Charles 2003, 2006; Farley et al 1994). Studies that probe the expressed residential preferences of African-Americans find evidence that fear of white hostility, rather than in-group preference, influences the reluctance of African-Americans to move into more integrated neighborhoods (Krysan and Farley 2002; Farley et al 1994). Even more recent work suggests that African-Americans choose to live in less white neighborhoods than they might prefer because they want to make sure they live in a more racially hospitable environment (Sampson and Sharkey, 2008).

Overall, the literature on neighborhood effects and housing patterns rightly points to important challenges in estimating the effects of social context on family outcomes, and the research on racial preferences highlights important tensions that still exist in a society with segregated urban areas. However, these literatures make several unwarranted assumptions that are critical to understanding how African Americans end up in poor segregated neighborhoods. First, previous research assumes that residential mobility is voluntary. Second, many studies assume that all households engage in a calculated process of weighing the pros and cons of a vector of neighborhood characteristics, including race, cost, crime, proximity to work, housing size, and amenities like parks, stores and schools (Bruch and Mare, 2006; Krysan et al, 2009; Clark, 2005). Our paper will challenge these assumptions directly, showing that the nature of residential mobility in poor black neighborhoods is primarily reactive, not voluntary. We will show that, in the face of involuntary relocation and constrained options, this careful accounting of racial characteristics and amenities does not generally hold for poor black families in our sample. Choice and preferences models might work for middle class families who can afford the search process, but not for poor families whose lives are characterized by higher levels of uncertainty and fewer resources. We also show that the process of neighborhood selection is directly shaped by this involuntary mobility, so as to be less of a selection process or choice, and more a default, circumscribed outcome.

In this paper, we also demonstrate how culture and structure interact to produce inequality in housing and neighborhood locations. We look at how poor families respond to the low income rental market (including housing availability, conditions, and the whims of landlords), public housing authority practices, neighborhood violence and the perverse consequences of the Section 8 program. We identify how the cultural frames of families who have experienced similar 'place-based' circumstances shape how they make housing and neighborhood decisions on the basis of their shared experiences. Through our interviews in two cities, we make the case that poor families rarely choose the social contexts that affect their lives, and the dynamics of life in poverty and structural forces they face severely limit their ability to choose and what the choice set looks like. We will also identify how families' coping responses to long term residence in violent, high poverty communities further contributes to the tenacity of their residence in such neighborhoods. In particular, we improve upon previous research by using life course residential biographies that include stories about all of a household's moves, to get a more comprehensive look at the determinants of residential mobility and the factors that shape neighborhood destinations.

Data and Methods

We derive our data from 140 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a stratified sample of low-income and poor African-American mothers and fathers in the Baltimore, MD and Mobile, AL metropolitan areas. These two locations were chosen based on their demographic similarities: both are highly segregated, predominantly African-American cities surrounded by majority-white suburbs. Both are housing markets dominated by only two racial groups: African-American and Caucasian (neither metropolitan area features a substantial ethnic enclave). To understand residential decision-making, we collected narratives about families' residential biographies, family histories, family dynamics, children's schooling, employment and neighborhood social context, among other things. Eligible respondents had at the time of the interview at least one child under the age of 18. We limited eligibility to those families who reported earning less than half of their respective metro area median income. Most mothers had household incomes totaling less than \$15,000 a year, or approximately what a family with one full-time federal minimum-wage earner would bring into the household. Many mothers earned no wage-based income.

The authors approached this study with an implicit understanding that housing lies at the center of a complicated constellation of problems for inner-city families and that the intensive nature of the interview design can produce potentially sensitive and incriminating information. Simple questions qualitative researchers routinely ask, for example, about household composition could incriminate mothers living in public housing who are housing men not currently listed on the lease. This makes traditional sampling methods problematic, in that the criteria we most want to sample on (such as the amount a respondent pays in rent, whether or not she receives a housing subsidy, or a possible history of eviction) require a more intimate connection with respondents than can be achieved by searching census data or asking about up front in order to determine eligibility before the interview.

Given these obstacles, we relied on what is referred to as a "maximum heterogeneity" model (Edin and Lein 1997). This approach recognizes a qualitative researcher's objective of balancing a need to follow a scientifically rigorous sampling strategy with recruiting respondents who feel secure and comfortable enough to share rich, informative details about their lives. Our sampling strategy used a multifaceted plan which first identified neighborhoods in Baltimore and Mobile that demonstrated considerable social disadvantage, marked by very high levels of poverty and racial segregation according to 2000 Census data. We also worked to ensure housing-type heterogeneity in neighborhood selection, including: public housing, site-based subsidized housing complexes, private multi-family apartment complexes, privately-owned row houses, and single family homes. In Baltimore, researchers recruited respondents using a street-sampling strategy, relying on face-to-face connections forged with individuals residing in geographically targeted neighborhoods. In Mobile, researchers contacted specific addresses from a larger representative survey of poor families to recruit respondents. Using this strategy we achieved a heterogeneous sample of families from over 50 neighborhoods in two cities.

All interviews focused specifically on capturing respondents' residential histories. Other scholars have relied on attitudes and vignettes and surveys to understand why people move and where they go (e.g. Farley, Frey, Krysan). We improve on this previous work by collecting residential biographies in detail. We asked respondents about their past catalysts for mobility, how they engaged in the housing search, what attributes they sought when choosing housing units and the constraints they felt when making such relocation decisions. We specifically probed for feelings of safety and efficacy in raising children in their past and current neighborhoods as well as what role the respondent felt the neighborhood played in their idea of "good" parenting. We also explored other factors that may affect neighborhood assessment, such as a desire to live among one's kin or racial group, knowledge about neighborhood school options, housing preferences, transportation issues and job opportunities. We also explored with the respondent what neighborhoods they would consider relocating into if they were to move again and their feelings about what constitutes a good or bad neighborhood.

Recorded interviews generally lasted between two and four hours. Respondents were paid \$50 for their time. Using MaxQDA software, interviews transcribed verbatim were systematically coded to identify what respondents identified as their reasons for previous residential relocations as well as what factors they weighted heavily in influencing what address to which they relocated. This data thus offered two specific categories requiring further analysis: Reason for Mobility and Housing Search Parameters. These two categories were then recoded to identify emergent themes which allow us to describe in rich detail the factors that low-income family heads consider when making relocation decisions.

Findings

Reactive Mobility

Previous studies find that low-income families experience residential mobility more frequently than more affluent families (Gasper, DeLuca and Estacion, 2009; Astone and McLanahan, 1994; Pribesh and Downey, 1999). However, what causes such high levels of mobility has not been thoroughly examined. While Rossi (1955) found that most moves in America were catalyzed by changes in household composition, we find that the moves of the black urban poor are most often driven by structurally caused crises, such as poor housing conditions, unresponsive landlords and aspects of the subsidized housing program. One startling finding from our interviews is just how many relocation "decisions" among the poor are not decisions at all, but rather reactions to outside forces. Approximately 70% of our sample described the reason behind their last relocation as one outside of their control.

Table 1. Reasons Given for Respondent's Last Relocation

Reactive Move Reasons	Baltimore Sample (n=40)	Mobile Sample (n=93)	Sample Average (n=133)
Unit failure	20.00%	27.27%	24.21%
HUD decisions/protocol	5.00%	23.64%	15.79%
Landlord Property decisions	5.00%	7.27%	6.32%
Eviction or housing affordability crisis	5.00%	3.63%	4.21%
Romantic breakup	2.50%	3.63%	3.16%
Receipt of public housing subsidy	30.00%	3.63%	14.74%
Total	67.50%	70.37%	68.42%
Decisions to Relocate			
Leaving a double-up	12.50%	10.91%	11.58%
Inherited housing from family	5.00%	0.00%	2.10%
Wanted to leave neighborhood conditions	10.00%	9.09%	9.47%
Wanted to buy house	2.50%	3.63%	3.16%
Household composition changes	0.00%	1.80%	1.05%
Wanted to larger dwelling unit	0.00%	5.45%	3.16%
Total	30.00%	30.10%	30.53%
Non-Mobility			
Never left parental home	2.50%	0 0.00%	1.05%

We refer to these moves as *reactive*, as the mobility is in response to an unforeseen, often unpredictable event. Virtually all families in our sample experience some kind of instability in the course of their lives. More than 80 percent of our sample had at least one reactive move in the course of their residential history. When such instability affects housing—such as a domestic violence episode or the crumbling condition of the dwelling itself—it often results in a move. Families who move reactively are responding to a variety of issues including: severe maintenance problems, HOPE VI public housing demolitions, vermin infestations, formal and informal evictions, among others.

The leading cause of reactive mobility is unit failure, responsible for approximately a quarter of all of the most recent moves made by respondents. Unit failure refers specifically to the dwelling-related problems which force tenants to relocate, adding a heightened sense of anxiety when one's home begins

to literally fall apart around their children. Many parents shared their experiences with sudden and severe unit problems:

- Well, when I first moved in I thought it was something, but when I got in I found out it was nothing....[I]n the room at the top that [the landlord] added on, they didn't fix the roof good...I keep telling the lady to get somebody in there. That was the reason we moved. The whole top had mildewed and mold. And it was about to cave in.

- [O]ur whole ceiling came in on us. In my daughter's room, like every time it would rain, it would leak and we would tell the landlord, like, "Please come fix it!" We would go to home depot and try to get things to fix it, still wouldn't work. Luckily [my daughter] was gone for the weekend and boom! And it all fell down.

- We had no heat. And I had just had my daughter. She was two weeks old. No heat. When he came and fixed it, a wire caught on fire inside of there, you know how sometimes you're supposed to put that black tape and stuff in there? And he rigged it up, it was smoking in there. And I had just, I had brought my baby from the hospital that day. My daughter, and the wire, it was like, you know how a firecracker looks when you light it? That's how it was doing. I got so scared I grabbed her and ran out the door. Because it was going, okay, you know where all the wiring is in the top part of like a wall space heater, it was going up towards, I didn't know it was going to explode. And I'm like, I'm getting out of here. I didn't have no shoes on or nothing. I grabbed her, and I just ran out the door.

Other parents told us that structural damage often allowed vermin to infiltrate their homes, and many families had rats and mice eating their food and had such severe roach infestations that they had to 'bomb' their houses with pesticides on a regular basis.

- [There's] a vacant house next door and a lady told me around here the other day that that house was on the news years back about being roach-infested and [had] a bunch of rats and mice and all that. So [that's] another thing that I'm not digging about this house. That's why I have a cat—the mice...the mice is horrible. I mean it got to the point where before I got a cat that I was sitting right here, and I had company one day and I was so embarrassed. It was like two mice in the kitchen like fighting over [what] I don't know. It was crazy. And then they come down the steps like, you know, like they live here. They don't pay rent!

In addition to the water damage and the deteriorating structure, these structure and pest problems often led the units to fail the annual Section 8 inspection, meant to determine if a house meets basic housing standards determined by HUD³.

- My whole house was backed up with sewer and they ain't call the Roto-Rooter to come and plunge it and I got tired of them so I told - called and told my worker and she gave me another voucher. That's how I got this house. That's how I move here.

- [The house on Durant Street] was only a six-month stay as well. Because they had to come out and re-inspect. What was going on with Durant? The stove, it was a gas unit. He had a screw drilled into the stove. Where you couldn't turn the stove all the way off. Cause if you did, the pilot would go out. And you'd have to go back underneath the stove to light it again. Not only that, you have your bathroom, the toilets, everything just leaking around. And it just was a house that should have never passed.

³ Almost half of the families in our sample were current or former participants in the Housing Choice Voucher program (formerly known as Section 8). Participation in the Housing Choice Voucher program requires routine inspections of the rental property, and a failure to pass inspection can result in termination of the lease. A few respondents welcomed these inspections, but many disliked having to move when their unit failed, and some told us about doing repairs themselves in order to help a disinterested landlord pass the inspection. For more on inspections as a source of reactive mobility, see DeLuca, Garboden, and Rosenblatt, 2013.

(But you had to take it?)

I HAD to take it because I only had ten days left on my voucher. Okay, so after it was something going on with the unit, I think the landlord wouldn't come and make the repairs that he had promised, and I had called them and told them that he had refused to do the repairs. So they came out and they did another inspection, and they found that it should have never passed again, and I would have to move.

Many respondents with housing vouchers indicated that they've experienced landlords who cannot bring a unit up to par at some point in their housing biography and often more than once. Thus, we find the most common cause for mobility experienced by the urban poor appears to be related specifically to unit failure.

In other instances, HUD was a major catalyst for mobility, accounting for 16 percent of relocations. In Mobile, HUD recently made major decisions to demolish or renovate aging public housing projects which forced much relocation during the past five years. In the case of Orange Grove's demolition, residents were given the option of accepting a Section 8 voucher or relocating into another Mobile public housing project. Many who accepted Section 8 reported the pressure to move quickly, often taking the first available unit they found:

Everybody stayin' over in the [Orange Grove] project...they gave everybody Section Eight.

(Oh, they gave everybody Section Eight?)

Everybody – they said you get apartment or a house, so I prefer the house.

(So where did you look for places to stay?)

Oh, I looked everywhere, all in the newspaper I looked everywhere. I was so frustrated tryin to find somewhere to stay at.

(Really, what was frustrating?)

Cause I had to find me somewhere to stay at.

(How much time did you have?)

Thirty days. I saw the house in the newspaper on that Thursday, so I called my landlord that Friday and he told me come down here and look at the house. I ain't waste no time.

In Baltimore, major public housing demolition under HOPE VI occurred a decade earlier and accounts for the significant variation between cities for moves within this category. However, decisions about apartment renovations or the transfer of families between units or complexes due to changes in family composition are regularly made and enforced by housing authority officials.

Approximately 15 percent of respondents' most recent moves were precipitated by the policies and practices of subsidized programs targeting the housing poor. Families often moved upon receiving one of three forms of public housing assistance: a Section 8 voucher, a site-based subsidized housing unit⁴ or an apartment in a public housing project. In both Mobile and Baltimore, extensive waitlists (often more than five or ten years long) guarantee that all eligible respondents will wait months to years for housing subsidies, and therefore have little control over if or when such benefits will be received. However, receipt and acceptance of such benefits virtually always spurred relocation and was a leading cause of mobility in our sample. The housing biographies of these families show that many low-income

⁴ Often referred to as "non-portable" Section 8 rentals, these privately-owned complexes offer apartments subsidized by the local housing authority or HUD which require low-income tenants to pay only a portion of their income towards rent.

parents get their first foothold as leaseholders in public or subsidized housing complexes, while many older parents cycle in and out of such complexes as a way of coping with financial volatility and housing instability. However, cities vary in what subsidized housing options they offer. After HOPE VI resulted in the demolition of many of Baltimore's public housing projects, the Baltimore Housing Authority has turned to site-based subsidization to fill the void that housing projects once filled. Conversely, Mobile has very few if any such structures.

The receipt of the Section 8 voucher comes with a limited window of time (varying on the public housing authority that distributes the voucher) to find a unit that passes inspection. This process often led to repeated searches, as one mother in Mobile recounted:

I called Section Eight and got them to send me out an application. I mailed the application back in and I was put on the waiting list. And that was in '99. And then they said they lost the application so I had to reapply again, and I applied in November 2001. And I got my voucher in 2003, I think 2003. And you go take this little class for a couple of hours down at Section Eight and they give you a voucher. And they tell you, you have 90 days...to look for your house. And what they do, when you find a house, you give them the address, whatever, they'll put a hold on your voucher while they do their inspection and stuff. If it fails inspection then they'll lift your voucher again and let you go for another house, up until that timeframe runs out. My timeframe ran out and I couldn't find a house that would pass inspection.

(Really? So how many houses did you look at?)

Oh, about 20...They actually, well, they actually went out and they inspected them and none of them passed for different reasons.

For many mothers, receipt of a voucher ushered in a stressful period where valuable housing assistance was wagered against their ability to find a passable unit in time.

The last major cause of reactive mobility is landlord action. We differentiate landlord action from eviction and unit failure. Most moves in this category occurred when landlords sold their properties to new owners who decided not to continue their leases. For Section 8 respondents in particular, this forced our respondents to find a unit quickly (within 30 days in Mobile to 60 days in Baltimore) or risk losing their vouchers.

- [My unit] was owned by Sawyer and Sawyer. [They] sold the property and [the new owners] didn't want any affiliation with voucher-holders so they made four hundred people move in sixty days.

- Chateau Oaks on Springhill Avenue, I was staying there for three and a half years. I was staying there from '04, to '07. Under section 8. And the beginning of '07 somebody bought the apartment complex, and they said they no longer taking low income housing. They want straight rent, and they fixed them up real nice, and everybody had to go. And then you had to, your voucher had to be renewed, so you could find another place to stay, and they only give you 30 days, and then 30 days come, couldn't find nowhere because the voucher was so low for two bedroom, that voucher wasn't for nothing but like \$450. You ain't fixing to find no two bedroom for 450 on section 8...A lot of people staying with their folks. Because they got kicked off the program. Can't pay no rent, or trying to skulk for somewhere to pay, it just messed up. It's messed up.

A handful of landlords suffered foreclosures or lost their properties due to unpaid property taxes, which also forced unexpected tenant relocation.

When Families Decide to Move

The problems which precipitate reactive mobility necessitate immediate action; there is not much time to think about a move before you make it. But a minority of our sample—approximately a third—made the seemingly voluntary *decision* to relocate from their previous unit. Though these families enjoyed more freedom in their residential decision-making than did families making reactive moves, the conditions under which these moves occur were often less than ideal; in fact, more often than not, for families in this sample, these environments were hostile. Most families decided to relocate as a response to family conflict, escalated neighborhood threats, and unmanageable housing costs.

The most common motivation for this type of move was a desire to leave the home of family members or friends. The first move out of a parent's home is an attempt to establish an independent household soon after the birth of a child and was often into some form of site-based subsidized housing or project-based public housing. A common sentiment is echoed by this young mother in Baltimore:

It came to a point where me and [my mother], we wasn't getting along. I was like you know what that means? I need to go get my own place. So that way we won't be in the same house together.

However, a majority of respondents relied on the hospitality of kin in emergencies such as unit failures and evictions that drove them from their previous address. Less frequently, voluntarily moving in with family members or friends was a way for cash-strapped families to make ends meet. However, respondents reported that “double-up” scenarios, where multiple families live under one roof, often resulted in significant tension between adults and this tension led to subsequent relocation.

- Me and my momma had a big argument, and I left her house, and I went and stayed with my dad for about 2 months, because he had moved over here from Miami into a house. And I left his house because the environment he had, and with my kids, I didn't like that environment that he was having in his house.... People coming in with drugs, drinking beer, he had a little head house. That's what he had. It wasn't no good place. My momma would always tell me that if I've got the kids there, she would call the CPA. And that's why I winded up moving.

- I ended up going to stay with my grandmamma.... But, I've got this cousin, right? I don't know what his deal is, but he's 21, 22 and he just got this filth thing going on with him. I'm just saying, you ever see just a filthy person? He's one of them... he the kind, he'll pee in the bottle or the cup, and he'll just leave it there. And I couldn't stay because I had them roaming babies, and then, I couldn't have them drinking that boy's pee. I just couldn't. So I ended up, I ended up going to a friend's house, they stay behind Church's in Maysville. And she let me went on and stay, but people, you really learn a person when you start living with them. Because oh man, it was like I was one of her kids. I can't do nothing. I can't talk on the phone. I've got to watch TV when they watch it.... I'm talking they had stole food stamps [from me] and everything.

In a handful of narratives, families found themselves moving to leave unbearable neighborhood conditions. For example, one woman in a Mobile housing project made her last two moves in response to her 16-year-old son being shot. Others left after witnessing horrific violence in front of their homes:

- It was so horrible. I never seen nobody get shot and I just turned 43 and I saw the guy get shot in front of my door. That was the first time. A month and half later, my daughters were across the street and I was going to cross the street [and] a guy came around the corner with a big, old gun and I said that was it!

- My kids, one day, they was outside in the yard playing and I was in the back layin' down and our stepdaddy, he was out there fixing my mom's van tire. And a guy from across the street just started shootin at some dude that was runnin' that way and bullets just flyin' past their head and they runnin in the house. [I said] “It's time to go.”

Many families decided to relocate when the threat of violence pressed up to their front door.

How Reactive Mobility Shapes Residential Selection

The catalysts for mobility often shape the housing search respondents are able to engage in. Receiving a unit in a public housing complex, for example, virtually eliminates all residential selection aside from refusing much-needed housing assistance. Moving in with family members or inheriting housing also eliminates such choice. Many of the ways families resolve residential problems is by relying on housing sources that do not offer a wide array of options to choose from.

But how inner-city, poor families do exercise housing choice—even within a set of constrained options—reveals how they end up in similarly disadvantaged neighborhoods, despite frequent mobility. In contrast to what might be referred to as *proactive* mobility, where one enjoys the luxury of time to research and prepare before making a relocation decision, *reactive* moves require quick action as families have only a matter of weeks (or less) to secure a new dwelling unit. With preventing homelessness as the primary objective, the criteria for selecting where to live is often reduced to covering the basics. After falling out with her husband, one Mobile respondent describes having little time and less money to find new housing; she moved into Orange Grove, a housing project that would soon be slated for HOPE VI demolition.

I moved from Bass Drive to Orange Grove...And that was an okay move. It wasn't a safe move. It wasn't somewhere I wanted to be. But it was better than not being anywhere. [Better than] living on the street.

Thus, the housing search made under a condition of reactive mobility is one characterized by expediency. In fact, many respondents said they never engaged in any search for housing, but were provided the information that led them to their current address. Under this pressure, parents turn to surefire means of quickly locating housing: their networks. As scholarship suggests (Granovetter 1973; Burt 1995), the information an individual derives from homogenous social networks is often similar to information they are likely to already have. Respondents were most likely to receive information about housing from their relatives, who are geographically close and also likely to be living in poor neighborhoods. Most often, those in these networks tender addresses of “For Rent” signs seen in nearby windows or the contact information of a “friend of a friend” who is leasing an available unit. Alternatively, when vacating a unit in a hurry, mothers seek emergency shelter with friends and family, increasing the likelihood that they will notice “For Rent” signs and find available housing near these kin, or chance upon the word-of-mouth referrals available in these locales.

- When my house caught on fire, we stayed with my girlfriend around the corner and me and her were going to the corner store and I saw the guy fixing it up.

(Was this the only unit you looked at?)

Yeah. I was so ready to get my own place again and it was nice when he fixed it up.

- This one was actually an emergency move when the ceiling caved in so we didn't look. It was just like my boyfriend's dad was like, "Hey, your ceiling caved in," and "Won't you come up here?" and that was it.

- It's all about who I know, too. I met this lady when my baby was comin' to the hospital and she was like so sweet. . . . She the one raised him in the hospital when he got shot that night, she did the paper for the insurance and all that stuff. . . . I met her then and she stuck with me the whole time. So when [my son] left the hospital she called me like one Saturday, she said "Hey, Miss _____, How's things goin' with J _____?" I said he's doin' good. She say, "Well, what are you gonna do about your livin' situation?" I said, well, I'm goin' to my sister's house and I've been lookin' every day, you know, for something that's decent and reasonable. . . . She said I got some land and she said actually I raised my kids there but I done built me a house next door to it. She said go look at that and if you like it I can rent it to you for \$600 a month and \$600 deposit.

Though many mothers describe using newspapers and apartment guides as supplements to their search, finding units through friends and family-members as well as coming upon such units during visits or emergency stays seemed to more often result in an actual move.

Mere observation of such residential patterning may be construed as a preference to live near one's social network, or evidence of a specific attachment to geographic neighborhoods where one has grown up, or of dependent kinship ties (Stack 1974; Briggs Popkin and Goering 2010). However, a more nuanced reading of this patterning is reflected in these mothers' reports of sheer expediency as a primary motivation when seeking a new residence. Many mothers spoke of activating network ties during housing search, yet expressed ambivalence to actually living near these family members.

I don't have to live close to my mother but. . . it just so happened that it was a house close to her.
(So, some do need to move closer to family members and others need distance. How about you?)
Probably distance. . . cus I don't like being bothered with family and friends I don't like. When I'm home I like to be home. I mean I keep saying the same thing over and over. I feel more comfortable in my house and my home is my home and it's not a really. I don't want to see people every day I don't want people knockin' on my door everyday. Stuff like that.

However, when mothers tap social networks as a means of locating new housing, they are significantly bounding their horizon of opportunity to units located around those they ask.

Another common source of information about housing units comes from the Section 8 housing list maintained by the local housing authority. As noted earlier, receiving a Section 8 voucher is a powerful motivator for leaving a current housing unit. However, as noted above, the Section 8 vouchers restrict the amount of time a family has to locate housing. Therefore, families do not have the luxury to do a full residential search and weigh the pros and cons of various housing options. The relative scarcity of landlords willing to take a housing voucher increases the desperation; families often take the first unit offered from a landlord willing to rent.

I went down to the [Baltimore] Housing Department and I got a book from down there that said which houses in the city were available. And I was having, like there was a bad leak in the house that I was living in before so it was like really messing things up really bad, so we had to be there right away while the landlord did the repairs on that house. So I looked through the book for someplace that was available like right away and I came across this, which wasn't too far, so it wouldn't have been really hard for me to move from there to here. So that's how I chose this place here.

(Was this the first unit you looked at?)

The first unit from out of the book at Section Eight.

Another common problem with housing searches based on the Section 8 list is their location: properties listed as available on the Section 8 list are almost exclusively located in low income, mostly minority areas.

(So you said you were thinking of moving, how might you get some information about where to live?)

When I go, do my lease, I can go before I go, I can get a housing list, they've got these vacant leases up there, I went and got one, but there wasn't nothing on the list that I wanted, everybody else houses in Prichard or Down the Bay, I don't want to move down there, I want to go out in West Mobile.

While in the field in 2010, we obtained the most recent list of Section 8 properties in Mobile, geocoded them to match census tracts, and analyzed the neighborhood characteristics of the areas. Out of 191 properties listed, only 9 were listed in low poverty neighborhoods and only 7 were in mostly white areas. This further underscores how the process of mobility can lead directly to the reproduction of neighborhood inequality.

The Significance of Dwelling Units

One striking finding to emerge from our interviews is that, as a result of the reactive and constrained housing search, families don't seem to choose neighborhoods as much as they choose *housing units*. First, respondents describing their housing search tell us that the unit is the focus of attention in a housing search, not the neighborhood. By this, we mean respondents did not often "select" a neighborhood such as Maysville, Mobile or Brooklyn, Baltimore and search for housing therein. They were not drawn by any specific aspect of a particular neighborhood, such as high-performing public school or accessible recreational center nor did any respondent indicate trying to find neighborhoods which matched their preferences for a specific demographic composition. Even families who wanted to move closer to friends and families did not feel they needed to share the same neighborhood.

Instead, the reactive or otherwise harried nature of the housing search restricts the horizon of concern for families to just meeting one's needs for shelter. And as noted above, parents who have spent their entire lifetimes in disadvantaged neighborhoods come to accept minimal standards from their neighborhoods and anticipate little from future communities. Urban poor families look for units and often what they look for predicts the scope of their housing search and their ultimate neighborhood attainment. Parents express having specific dwelling goals which guides them through their housing trajectory (Wood, forthcoming). The desire of virtually all respondents to live in a detached, single-family house over all other forms of dwelling is consistent across both cities. When low-income families can engage in housing search by reading newspaper ads or other listings, they often describe looking for affordable houses first, homing in on house-specific advertised features such as basements, backyards and number of bathrooms.

Most described that living in a single-family house would be preferable to multi-family structures for several reasons. For one, houses are seen as the best protection against negative or hostile neighborhood elements.

- I still would rather have the house. You are in a freer environment. You are at least not subjected to other people's habits and dealing with them even if it is not a great neighborhood.

- I don't like that you have people atop of you or next to you. You know? I never—the door, anybody could come in The hallway. Share the steps. I never liked that. Apartments are unsafe to you.

- I don't want no apartment. [In an] apartment, you have little children throwin' your stuff all in the yard. [Neighbors] getting mad with you...I said I want me a house. I got a house and I felt better. I felt better in a house with my own yard, all this and that, you know.

By having tenants share entryways, thruways and other spaces, apartments were seen as risky dwelling options by many and thus avoided. However, respondents also indicated that houses were better living options for families because they offered the space and amenities they felt were vital housing elements for childrearing.

- I want a section 8 house because I want my own house. For my kids, I can put stuff out there in the yard to play with. You can't even put a pool out here. You can't put nothing out here. And you can't let your children go on the playground, because that's a sex field. That's all that is.

- I just think a house is better. Like riding bikes and stuff like that, the apartment complex I live in where can my kids ride a bike at, I would have to take 'em to the playground. I want it to be whereas though they can ride a bike and stay in the backyard where I can look out the window and see you all right there. I don't wanna have to take you all over to a playground away from my house when you all could be right here in a house.

Families with young children wanted backyards and basements to serve as play areas, preferring places they could monitor as preferable to shared spaces like parks and playgrounds. Lastly, houses were most valued because of the sense of proprietorship they appeared to offer.

I think [I'd prefer] a standalone house... because they have more space and then, you know, kids [are] creative, they like to fly kites and run around and draw and color. Just my own big property would be ideal for my kids...Yeah, so they can do whatever you wanna do. You mess up, I got it; you don't gotta explain to nobody else. You're not on nobody else's property. This "L" grass, this is "L", you can do whatever you wanna do because it belong to me.

Though most low-income families rent, even renting a stand-alone house gave some respondents the semblance of the homeownership they aspired to; in houses, they could "feel" like homeowners in ways they could never in an apartment.

Dwelling preferences undoubtedly influence the residential selection and neighborhood sorting of respondents. If families are selecting on the basis of house type and prefer a type of housing thought to be the most expensive, their constrained housing budgets may channel them to look for such desired housing in areas with very low property values and concurrently low rents as to maximize their rental dollar on dwelling amenities. Conversely, families eschewing apartments for lack of desired amenities could be missing some of the few affordable rental options in low-poverty neighborhoods. Therefore, despite the focus on neighborhood selection in the literature, we find that selection is not about choosing *neighborhoods*, it's about choosing a particular kind of *housing* unit (a townhouse over an apartment; a regular apartment over the housing projects). Choosing housing units is a function of culture and costs--how much desirable housing can a family get for the money. The cultural aspects of choosing a unit are a direct response to living in dangerous neighborhood, as will be discussed below. The structural aspects of housing unit choices are obvious when we consider the fact that the larger and more available housing these families can afford is already in poor areas. This is true of rental housing in general (due to

zoning), LIHTC units, and Section 8 amenable landlords. Most respondents who are dissatisfied with their neighborhoods (a common theme) rarely ever opt to relocate because of the dissatisfaction. "Putting up" with bad neighborhoods is far more common, especially in order to get the housing or dwelling type you want.

Neighborhood "Selection": Racial Preferences, Safety and Satisficing

Another common assumption in the literature is that African American families are choosing neighborhoods on the basis of racial composition. Though very few families have engaged in unconstrained choice, we asked all respondents to draw for us an image of their ideal neighborhoods. We probed specifically to see if racial makeup was a factor in this decision. Overwhelmingly we find that selection among poor minority families is virtually never about selecting black neighborhoods over white neighborhoods per se. As one mother in Mobile told us:

- (And have you lived in any neighborhood, like the ones you were telling us?)

Belvedere was mixed [racially].

(And do you think there's a difference between being mixed, or being in a black neighborhood?)

It is different. It's a big difference. You know me, staying in an all black neighborhood, trouble. But you know, if you've got a mixture, it's less trouble. When I was in Belvedere, less trouble. Because it was a mixture. Everybody got along. No kind of racial stuff going on, nothing. None of that.

(Are there any advantages living in a neighborhood where it's mostly black folks?)

No advantage at all.

Our families rarely if ever mention racial composition as a criterion for 'choice' in their narratives about finding housing. When asked about it explicitly, they say that it doesn't matter⁵.

- (Were there more white people there?)

Yeah, some more white folks out there and then you got some out here back around behind me, like back there.

(And then when you lived at James' house for a little bit, by that area, is that mostly African American?)

Yeah.

(Or is there a mix there?)

That mostly African American.

(And if you had to, I guess like your ideal neighborhood that you'd like to pick, does it matter race, would you like to have more African American or mixed?)

It doesn't matter.

- Cus race don't make a difference. People still people. Everybody's got different personalities and characters so, race wouldn't make a difference.

- I always said: blood don't have no color; friend don't have no color; money don't have no color.

(Is there a mix that you would feel most comfortable with?)

⁵ In part, this may be due to lack of knowledge of racially mixed or mostly white areas (Krysan and Bader, 2009). As part of the interviews in Mobile, we asked respondents about a variety of neighborhoods that varied by race and class. It was common that respondents told us they either didn't know much about the far-flung white neighborhoods outside of Mobile county, or they said that they had only heard about the fact that the houses were nice there, but they had never spent any time in those communities.

-I feel comfortable with anybody because it's just me, I just get along with anybody so I don't care if they was orange people, I'd still feel comfortable. [laughter] It wouldn't make me no difference.

When neighborhood selection does ostensibly happen, mostly, it's about achieving a baseline for safety. Poor families don't select on safety in a way that corresponds with the idea of a safe neighborhood or tract as defined in the literature; instead, they "satisfice" on safety, which is to say they choose neighborhoods that feel "safe enough." There are two reasons we believe this to be true. For one, we asked how families assess a neighborhood's safety while searching for housing. Secondly, as described above, we document all their reasons for relocation throughout their housing mobility biographies. We know very few moves are prompted by concerns about one's neighborhood. This puzzle as to why families do not respond to neighborhood dangers or problems via mobility is discussed below.

In making these decisions, "good" is mostly the absence of "bad" and "bad" mostly means the housing projects. For most of these families, public housing project neighborhoods are the least safe places one can move their families. Any neighborhood—even those abutting the projects—are seen as safer places to live.

(Where are you absolutely not looking for housing?)

Projects. Projects, like rough neighborhoods.

(I mean, I know some of the projects, but what neighborhoods are you going to avoid?)

Hell I can't really think of them... Um, McCullough Homes, that's one area. Um, let me think. Latrobe... But they're like a big complex. Where a lot of people live, there's a lot of stuff goin on. I don't think I would want to live. There's too much drama and things goin on in that area.... A lot of people fighting and arguing.

As we might expect given the constraints families feel in the throes of a reactive housing search, few families appear able to select on neighborhood-level variables such as high-performing schools, clean playgrounds or accessible recreation centers for their children. When assessing a neighborhood, parents often look for specific, visible problems they believe are associated with "bad" neighborhoods, namely idle, black men in white t-shirts thought to be selling drugs on street corners:

If I go somewhere and look at a house and all I see is a bunch of guys on the corner or I'm a mother and I don't want this and one place I went to the place was for rent and they were sitting on the stoop and blunt paper everywhere

[- More so the drug sales. The guys standing on the corner pants hanging off their butts. They just there all day long to sell drugs and don't worry about the little kids or the older people walking past. And that just brings the neighborhood down.

- I mean I would wanna keep [my son] away from... neighborhoods definitely where there's lots of drugs going and people just seem to be standing on the corner with seemingly no destination to go to.

But as noted above, neighborhood-level problems are rarely catalysts for mobility. Respondents tolerate a range of frustrations with their neighborhoods; issues such as drug trade, gang activity, and frequent robberies seemed not to drive these families from their units.

(What do you see when you walk down the street during the day? What do you normally see?)

I usually see drug addicts, dealers, prostitutes during the day

(How do you know they are prostitutes?)

They'll sit out dressed like provocatively and stuff and then they will get in the car and drive down the street they will stop and they'll like an hour for fifty dollars or like two hours a hundred dollars and then the person will get in.

- Well, I feel safe so far cause all the things that used to go on here years ago, you know when people were breaking and entering people's houses, it's not like that no more. These streets used to be real bad, with you know breaking people's houses and things....Oh that was years and years ago. Back when I first moved over here, baby. I'd say about 10 or 12 years ago, when I first kind of moved over here, used to do a lot of that. But now, you very seldom hear that someone done broken someone's home or house or something.

The focus on housing units versus neighborhoods, and settling for high crime neighborhoods are part of a complex cause-effect process that has implications for other family behaviors. In an effort to feel safe and in control, families withdraw inside their homes, as described below.

Strategic Retreat: Selecting on Quiet Isolation

A lifetime of "pinball effect," jumping from bad neighborhood to bad neighborhood over the course of one's life leads families adopt safety strategies which largely accept the inevitability and universality of danger, substandard housing, and even poor schooling (cf. DeLuca and Rosenblatt, 2010a). The sheer frequency of reactive moves experienced in residential biographies of respondents likely means foregoing any kind of neighborhood selection for many successive moves. Many respondents express the sentiment that neighborhoods matter little in their family's lives and as such weigh little in their housing search parameters. In this light, neighborhood selection is better understood as neighborhood "satisficing," eliminating residential options that fall below a minimal threshold as to allow respondents to feel they are providing a safe, decent living environment for their families.

(Can you tell me what an "ok" neighborhood looks like?)

Where the kids are safe. Where I can leave something outside the back door without it disappearing. Where I can sit on my front steps without seeing somebody fist-fighting. Where I can walk out my door without piles of paper everywhere. Where I can sit on my steps and be willing to sit there for more than an hour. Sit there and be able to enjoy—sitting outside. Instead of telling my children that they can't go out there alone. Giving them a limit. Because some people tell their kids they gotta come in before it get dark. Around six or so. My children, they can't stay out there that long. Even my teenage one. She goes outside. She got to be back by seven-thirty. Seven-thirty for somebody that is about to turn fifteen is a lot. It's a lot. That's a bit early! That's a bit early! But it is what it is! It's not safe around here!

To survive in such environments, families adopt several parenting strategies which offer a sense of security when living in such contexts. Neighborhoods are often made less consequential in the minds of respondents when they tell us "we don't live outside, we live in here" (Rosenblatt and DeLuca, 2012). Said verbatim by several parents, this in-home strategy is believed to "shut the door," so to speak on neighborhood-level concerns and allow parents to feel a sense of control in a relatively shaky living environment. Keeping children indoors is a key component of this strategy, as one Baltimore mother explains:

I really don't let them play in the street or in the yard or anything like that. I don't trust it. I know last year my daughter wanted to go outside and I was about to let her go and on the next corner three people got shot right there

in broad daylight. So ever since then I was just like no we will go to a park or we'll just go to the playground at your school or we will just go down to the harbor or something like that. I don't let her go outside.

Respondents appreciate neighborhood environments where residents keep to themselves, respecting each other's privacy and maintaining benign disinterest in one another's affairs.

- (How about the neighborhood around here?)

It's a pretty nice neighborhood. Everybody keeps to their own business.

- I mean, what people do out here is there business and I feel like wherever I'm at, as long as they're not bothering me whether I had kids or not, I don't worry about that.

Families prefer neighborhood social ties to be as simple: "they know my face" and "I know theirs." Many don't know the names of neighbors they have lived near for years.

- I'm to myself and I can just sit over here and ain't gotta worry about nobody comin next to me, nobody. I don't want you comin in and knock on my door, can you borrow this, nothin, cause I don't borrow nothin from you.

- It's quiet. Ain't too much to really put up [with] here. It's quiet. You have to knock on a neighbor's door to get a conversation....It is just very quiet and people stay to themselves.

Furthermore, respondents tell us that their street smarts allow them to live in communities they often would not recommend to others. They can do this, in part, because they adopt parenting strategies which they feel allow them to live in slightly more unsavory neighborhoods than ideal because they know "they can handle it."

I lived here my whole life so I've basically know the good neighborhoods and the bad neighborhoods. I would definitely not want to live here not knowing anything about Baltimore. This is a high crime area. I would be concerned for her safety, number one. So I definitely would tell her no, not to do it.

(Any other reasons why you would tell her she wouldn't want to do it?)

Yeah! Because of the crime, drugs, violence and it's not one of the best neighborhoods...I can handle it because I'm from here and I've been here my whole life.

- (Tell me how safe do you feel during the day walking around?)

I'm fine. The reason is 'cause I don't walk around scared because of where I'm from; cause of what I use to do in the street.

(So walking around at 11 at night?)

I got no problem at all.

(What do you think goes on in this neighborhood at night that worries you?)

Robbing, stealing, drugs, gangs. My mother? Would I allow her to walk out there at 11? No. Would I allow any of my siblings? No.

(But you can handle it.)

I think I can handle it more so because I have been to the dark side. On the dark side, I been out in the streets late at night with the worst and the baddest.

-This is one of the worst neighborhoods in Mobile, Stefanie. You only safe here because you with me.

Others adopt strategies for keeping themselves safe on the street:

- (And how about when you were in Tobinville, were there times you felt unsafe there?)

Oh yeah, all the time. I mean one time they was robbing people in the neighborhood and that was before I got my car, I just had to walk to work, you know? I worked right around the corner from the house, just had to walk to work, at 10:30 at night, just be scared.

(What would you do?)

I didn't worry about. I'm gonna do something to you. No matter what you do to me, I'm gonna stab you. Haha. I'm just telling you the truth.

While a seemingly rational response to a lifetime of exposure to violent neighborhoods, confidence in one's coping skills and 'strategic retreat' into the home also serves to keep families from seriously considering better neighborhoods. Understanding these processes is critical for interpreting the results from previous research on housing interventions.

Conclusion

Although poor families move often, we see what Sampson (2008) calls "profound structural constraint," and Oakes (2004) calls "structural confounding": consistent patterns whereby poor minority families are trapped in and between segregated, disadvantaged communities. The residential biographies of the urban poor reveal that this patterned mobility reflects the instability they experience in other aspects of their lives. By distinguishing reactive from proactive mobility, we show that the type of mobility experienced by families influences their neighborhood attainment. Moves out of disadvantaged neighborhoods require, at minimum, time and research—two luxuries not afforded to those forced to relocate. As such, when forced to move reactively, families often recreate the neighborhood context of their previous address. In part this helps to provide some of the mechanisms to explain findings from previous research on locational attainment, place-based stratification and intergenerational transmission of neighborhood context (Logan and Alba, 1993; South and Crowder, 1997; Sharkey, 2009).

Furthermore, we show that when housing choice can be exercised, more than neighborhood context matters in residential decision-making. Previous mobility research often neglects many of the circumstances experienced by the poor that influence their decision-making. Most notably, we show that parents who grow up in disadvantaged neighborhoods develop means of coping with them; though living in a high-poverty neighborhood is never cited as preferable, many families describe being able to tolerate such surroundings if it means making the housing they most desire affordable (see also Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012). As Wood (forthcoming) also suggests, this satisficing on neighborhood attributes allows many resource-constrained households to allocate their limited housing budget on needs or desires other than housing. Respondents across both cities value specific dwelling attributes that they feel are necessary to raise children, and demonstrate distaste for dwelling types such as multi-family apartments. These dwelling preferences often inform respondents' decisions about which

neighborhoods they would like to live in and, in this way, work alongside other preferences and constraints to dictate locational attainment.

Findings such as these call for a reinvigorated investigation into how the urban poor experience mobility, and the implications for how such residential decision-making reproduces segregation and unequal neighborhood sorting (Sampson and Sharkey, 2008). The shaky integrity of housing options selected by the urban poor is often driving a significant portion of mobility and is therefore a key determinant of the residential instability of poor, black families. Landlords play an important role in this puzzle. Though we offer the caveat that we have only the tenant's side of the story, these biographies reveal that the inner-city poor often struggle to get basic maintenance issues addressed by landlords. Policies which incentivize landlords to upkeep and maintain inner-city housing or conversely, policies which raze and condemn uninhabitable properties would do much to reduce this instability.

Though much of the story we portray about the mobility of the urban poor revolves around the lack of choice these families seem to have, preferences nevertheless play a crucial role. That few respondents in our sample seemed to consider racial composition a significant factor driving their actual residential decisions should lead us to look into other ways preferences work within the context of the housing search itself to shape neighborhood outcomes. Here, we offer dwelling-type preferences as one such mechanism which likely interacts with other preferences and information-search processes to predict what units individuals will search for and, consequently, what neighborhoods they choose amongst.

We highlight several strategies families develop in response to reactive mobility and life in high poverty communities. These include: using kin networks to find housing; choosing 'first available' housing from the Section 8 list or nearby rental signs; employing "strategic retreat" social strategies to keep to themselves and protect their children; settling for the "somewhat safe" neighborhood that meets a bare minimum requirement; and make trade-offs between housing unit and neighborhood quality. These processes suggest that housing programs and interventions intended to increase geographic opportunity cannot assume families will have the opportunity to search the whole menu of metropolitan neighborhoods as possible destinations, or that they fully understand all of the tradeoffs involved in moving to new communities. Rather, these families will need intense housing counseling to learn about the possible benefits of different kinds of communities, to search for affordable high quality housing in these areas, and to negotiate with landlords (see DeLuca et al., 2010; DeLuca and Rosenblatt, 2010b).

The study of residential selection and mobility provides crucial direction towards understanding the mechanisms which work to reproduce urban poverty. Further investigation into how individuals talk about their residential choices, engage in housing search and pass down scripts for residential selection to their children is necessary if we are to combat the social problem of persistent segregation.

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